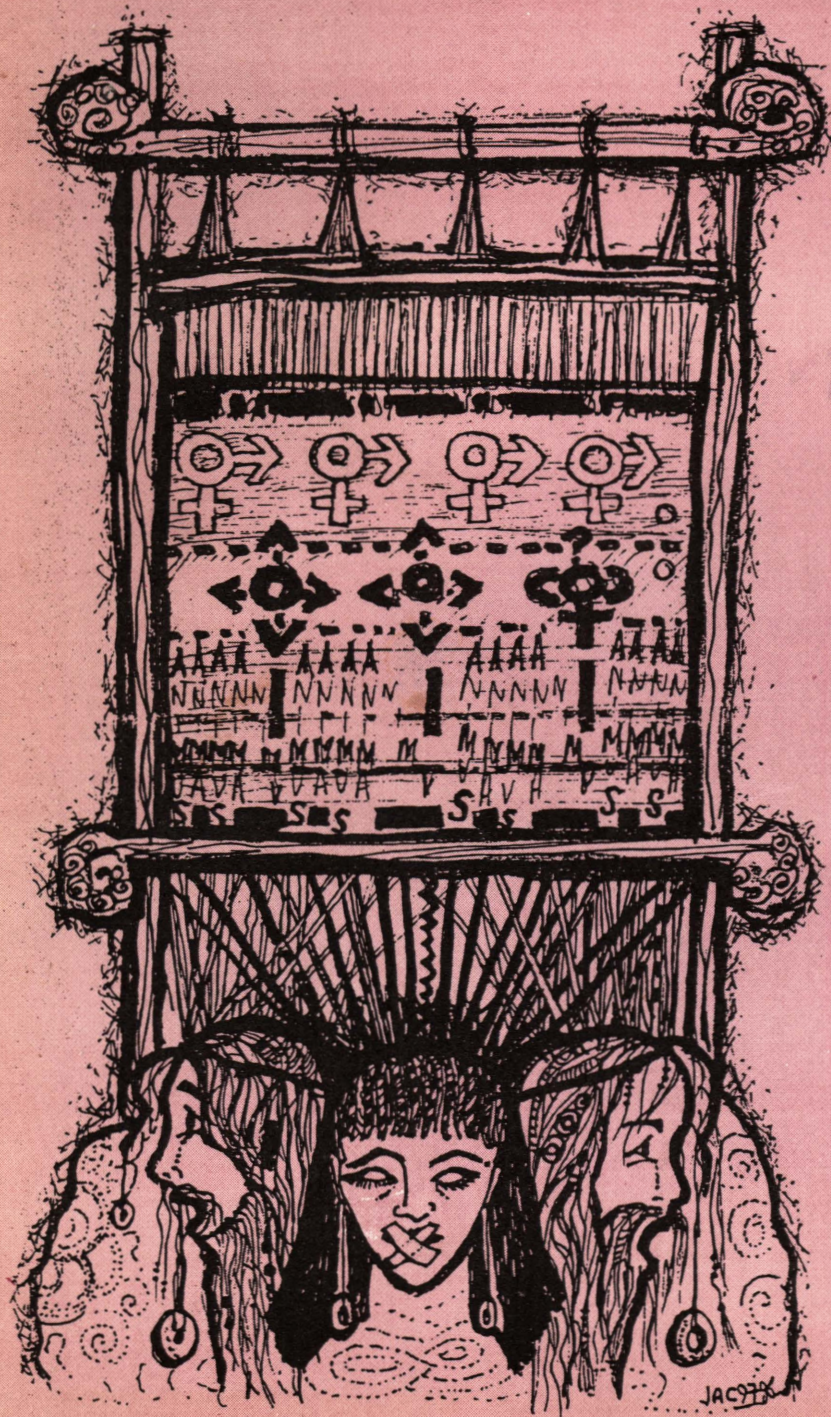


AT THE EDGE

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No.6 June 1997

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**Pussycat, pussycat,
where have you been?**

AT THE EDGE

Exploring new
interpretations of
past and place in
archaeology, folklore
and mythology

Issue No.6 June 1997

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Beyond

Indiana Jones *versus* the Mother Goddess

At the Edge aims to cover the broad territory where the disciplines of archaeology, folklore and mythology 'converge' on place-related topics. This is a wide-ranging scope in its own right. Why then should we be moving off into the apparently unrelated topics of sex and gender? Put simply, the answer is that those who are questioning how modern society constructs sex and gender are creating waves which ripple out into the comparative backwaters of, say, sacred landscapes and 'earth mysteries'. However, so far as I am aware, little of the exciting and provocative thinking in gender issues has been surfacing in the more popular periodicals. This issue of *At the Edge* makes attempts to get behind the verbosity and highlight some of the ideas that are emerging.

The deeply entrenched ideology of Western culture has created biased thinking at the deepest levels of anthropological and scientific theory and method. This legacy of 'modernism' is being challenged from two main directions: firstly, by postmodern critiques and, secondly, by feminism. There are some similarities between the two movements but few feminists are willing to label themselves postmodernists and, similarly, many who might be described as postmodernists are profoundly sceptical of recent feminist thinking.

Those who have delved into the feminist approach re-emerge with uncompromising vigour:

'The issues raised by taking gender seriously are extraordinarily varied and have significant ramifications . . . ' (Conkey and Tringham 1995: 203-4)

'The issues at stake are far from trivial. Postmodernism is challenging, among other things, the fundamental dichotomies of Enlightenment thought, dichotomies such as rational/irrational and subject/object. It is questioning the homocentricity of Enlightenment knowledge and even the status of "man" himself.' (Hekman 1990: 2)

' . . . more than any approach within the human sciences, feminism does fundamental damage to the established traditions of working within archaeology . . . ' (Thomas 1992: 12)

The 1980s saw some pioneering work on archaeological approaches to women and gender but not until 1991 did a major study of feminism in archaeology appear in print (Gero and Conkey 1991). Indeed, the title of one of the key papers in this volume asked 'Why is there no archaeology of gender?' (Wylie 1991), although the author acknowledged that the absence was not quite total.

This is not to say that archaeology and feminism had not already crossed paths, although the results have left a legacy which is far from admissible. Marija Gimbutas's interpretations of the early neolithic society at Catal Huyuk in Anatolia created the 'mythopoeitics' of a peaceful, egalitarian, female-led society who worshipped a Great Mother Goddess. Gimbutas's ideas may be unacceptable to the current generation of academics but they have become thoroughly entrenched in popular literature, making Catal

The issues raised by taking gender seriously are extraordinarily varied and have significant ramifications



Why is there no archaeology of gender?

Huyuk the archaeological site *par excellence* for feminists.

I have no wish to summarise all the reasons why Gimbutas is 'out of fashion' in academe as this has been done adequately elsewhere (see especially Meskell 1995 and 1996; also Conkey and Tringham 1995; Hamilton *et al.* 1996; Georgoudi 1992). What these researchers emphasise is that Gimbutas, although now the best-known of the advocates of a pan-neolithic 'Mother Goddess', was not alone. Indeed, a number of her key arguments are based on the interpretations of highly-respected male archaeologists of the 40s and 50s.

An example of the false logic in Gimbutas's interpretations can be seen in one of her best-known ideas, that the high frequency of 'Mother Goddess' images in the neolithic reflected the dominant position of women in society. However, history reveals that the presence of powerful goddesses in a religious pantheon rarely reflects anything about the role of females in that society. For instance, the prevalence of statues of the Virgin Mary in pre-Reformation churches in no way diminishes the profoundly misogynic inclinations of the Roman Catholic clergy. Female figurines do not 'express' female power and Gimbutas and her followers have perpetrated a *non sequitur* akin to observing that the popularity of Barbie dolls means that Goddess worship is widespread in American society.

From feminism to feminisms

'First Wave' feminism of the 60s and 70s countered androcentrism with equally extreme gynocentrism. 'Male' values of domination, rational thinking and abstraction were



rejected, resulting in the privileging of nurturing, relatedness and 'irrational' thinking (more accurately, what might be termed a different kind of rationality). Feminist thinking in the 80s and 90s has rejected such over-generalised dualistic oppositions and considers the greater variability and diversity that exists within gender roles. Rather than reversing the dualism, postmodern feminism seeks to dissolve the distinction. Put succinctly, gender is the way cultures use sexual differences.

When the term 'woman' is unpacked it contains a range of possible social identities e.g. variations in social status/wealth; young women; old women; priestesses; etc. In modern Western society, the



Rather than reversing the dualism, postmodern feminism seeks to dissolve the distinction.

challenges facing a poor, coloured, single-mother are distinct from the challenges facing an affluent 'bachelor girl' intent on creating a high-status career in the male-dominated world of commerce. In some traditional societies, the range of female roles is at least as varied. Just as there are various roles for women, so polemical feminism has also fragmented into distinct approaches, such that it is now more appropriate to refer to 'feminisms' rather than 'feminism'. What might be termed 'third-wave feminism' is concerned with culture, knowledge, language and representation.

Many genders

We are not talking here simply about the 'substitution' of male/female with an equivalent pair of 'gender roles'. Such one-to-one links between sex and gender are naive. A quick glance at modern Western society reveals homosexuals and lesbians. A less furtive glance soon shows that both of these 'genders' can be subdivided into at least two gender roles, to which can be added a 'middle ground' of various bisexual 'options'. Indeed, male homosexuality encompasses a great diversity of gender roles - and 'closet gays' (or whatever one should call gays who are not 'out') almost inevitably play out different roles at different times or places.

A more lingering look at modern subcultures would also divulge a wide range of gender roles among those who are sexually 'straight'. Such variety is far from modern - traditional European society also knew of 'sexless women' (such as nuns) and, although the literature is scanty, must have coped with physical hermaphrodites (which naturally occur once in about 1,000 births although these are now 'corrected' by surgery).

The ambiguous status of women past child-bearing age has led to, on the one hand, their being acclaimed as healers



or midwives while, on the other, running the risk of being ostracised as 'witches' (see Briggs 1996: 71; 270).

Even, as during the seventeenth century in England, when the cultural 'norm' is for women to be attached to fathers, husbands or (while 'in service') their masters, this does not prevent so-called 'masterless women' from leading their own lives - even though they caused consternation by defying conventional assumptions about women's dependence (Underdown 1985: 36-7).

Ultimately, in studying gender roles, one begins to examine how *individuals* experience life within specific social and cultural contexts. It is this which makes 'engendered studies' so distinct from the 'generalisations' which are still the normal approach to recreating the past. In her article on 'Constructing sex and gender in archaeology' in this issue of *At the Edge*, Lynn Meskell sheds light on how she is adopting such an approach to her own critique of ancient peoples of the Aegean.

The boys' club

But 'engendering archaeology' is not simply about putting gender into the interpretation of the past. Also is being 'engendered' is the process of doing archaeology. Unlike folklore, where female researchers have played important roles (despite the efforts of some overly-dominant males), academic archaeology has a reputation for being a 'boys club' where the quest for knowledge has centred on excavation, new scientific methodologies and similar macho concerns. Indiana Jones may be a caricature but he is simply larger-than-life, not fictitious.

The alternative to excavation is, of course, fieldwork and regional surveys. These have never been a 'macho' activity, despite the excellent results obtained, as much such work is performed by female archaeologists (see Moser 1996). A number of readers of *At the Edge* will quickly recognise that fieldwork has been deemed an

area where 'trained' amateurs can contribute alongside professionals - although it would be widening the scope of this article too far to discuss how professional/amateur form all-too-obvious dualisms within archaeology.

Gender in folklore

Unlike archaeology, folklore and mythology in recent decades reveal a much better balance between male and female exponents, both in the 'middle ranks' and in the higher echelons. This is not to say that there have not been some overly-dominant men (see Billington 1995 and Boyes 1993).

Mythology has its own 'Gimbutas', although intriguingly it is a man who promoted a 'primordial matriarchy'. Inspired largely by Plutarch's treatise on *Isis and Osiris*, written about AD 120, Johann Jacob Bachofen published his major opus on 'The Mother Right' (*Das Mutterrecht*) in 1948. Bachofen does not use the term 'matriarchy' but rather such terms as 'maternal law' and 'gynecocracy'. His style of writing is 'part poetry, part science' but he develops a strongly dualistic view which identifies women with 'mother', 'nurse', 'seat' and 'site' of generation (Georgoudi 1992: 451). He suggests the human race first lived in a period of 'chthonian materialism' (with undisciplined sexual relations in the manner of Aphrodite) followed by a more ordered materialism incorporating both agriculture and marriage. This phase is exemplified by Demeter, leading to a Dionysiac gynocracy where 'the fragility and precariousness of the father's victory' leads to paternal principles beginning to dominate (Georgoudi 1992: 451-4).

Praised by some and criticised by others, Bachofen's work on matriarchy is still the starting point for all histories of matriarchy - including both

Ultimately, in studying gender roles, one begins to examine how *individuals* experience life within specific social and cultural contexts.



interpretations based on psychoanalysis and on Marxist-influenced thought. However, the difficulties of Bachofen's complex prose mean that his ideas have been overly simplified or are inaccurately presented. However, even if Bachofen's ideas received a lukewarm welcome in the conservative world of Classical studies, his notions are still pervasive. Those who have embarked on a critical re-examination of Bachofen find that they are removing nearly all the lower levels of the 'tower of cards' making up the prevailing interpretations of the Classical societies.

It should be emphasised that most of the researchers who are re-examining the gender prejudices of mythology and early societies, while often female, are not polemical feminists. In *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (Larrington 1992) world mythology is examined by 21 female authors with a special emphasis on the identity and function of female mythical figures. In *A History of Women: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (Pantel 1992), 15 women and a solitary man similarly explore how women have been depicted in early historical records. Clearly, in the pre-medieval eras which are being discussed in these books, history and mythology intermingle closely. Such 'piecemeal' examination of specific historical societies reveals a denial of women's identity in myth, religion and culture (see also Eilberg-Swartz and Doniger 1995; and Birrell 1996 for a rare example of a feminist view of Chinese myths).

Taking as an example the Germanic warbands of the early medieval era, usually considered to be especially 'macho', the detailed study by Enright (1996) reveals that women had an ambiguous high-status role - encompassing the powerful roles of arbiter of social rank and of seeress within the superficially low-status function of serving the mead cup to guests.

Independently, Pollington (1996) has shown that, while warfare was generally regarded as men's work in Germanic and Anglo-Saxon societies, there are enough allusions in the literatures of the northern peoples to suggest that women had a powerful role. The Norse *valkyrjar* (valkyries) are women dedicated to Óðinn who share the military life of his devotees. In later literature they appear as

demure maidens, although there are enough clues to suggest a grislier earlier role - possibly priestesses of the cult of Óðinn who sacrificed captives to their god. The Irish warbands had female members who sometimes fought alongside the men and so were more akin to 'shield maidens' than mere camp followers tending wounds and other needs (Pollington 1996: 70).

Rituals of women's initiation

The ethnographic literature has long concerned itself with initiation rituals of traditional societies. Much of the early fieldwork was by men, so there would be few opportunities to explore women's rites, and as a direct result men's initiation rituals dominate the established literature. However, in recent decades the increasing number of female field workers has begun to reveal how much evidence has been inaccessible to (or, more probably, simply missed by) male researchers.

Based on available accounts, more than half (56 percent) the traditional societies initiate girls, but less than half (38 percent) initiate boys. Very few (7 percent) initiate both. 'Girl's rituals often differ from boys in exhibiting sexual licence, privileged obscenity or mockery of men and male occupations; while nothing similar takes place during the transformation of boys. . . . Such behaviour is not a spontaneous reaction to the occasion but a necessary part of the proceedings.' (La Fontaine 1985: 108; 164-5; a striking re-examination of the rituals of women's initiation can be found in Lincoln, 1981.)

Cracks or structural defects?

I have deliberately merely 'dipped a toe' into the various oceans of recent research which are re-examining all aspects of anthropology. By rejecting the

preconceptions of modern androcentricity and the diminutive range of gender roles which are readily acknowledged in Western society then, firstly, richer and more varied versions of past civilizations begin to crack open - and quickly those cracks extend to risk toppling the entire edifice of how we 'recreate' the lives of people who are, more than ever before, different from ourselves.

However, as Julian Thomas (1996) reminds us, for men there is 'the awful dilemma of being a bloke and liking feminist theory' as the fascination of feminist ideas 'can become a means to an end, a way of addressing other questions' whereas for women, feminism is above all a means of achieving one's own emancipation.

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Constructing

Sex and Gender in Archaeology

In the past decade archaeologists have become increasingly interested in constructions of gender in past societies and have endeavoured to (re)construct the culturally specific meanings of those categories. Basically, archaeologists engage in a form of gender tourism with the past: I take this term to describe our contemporary excursions into gender constructions and experiences in the past. From this perspective archaeologists fulfil the role of tourist or voyeur, exploring distant cultures from which we are separated through time and space. We attempt to travel in unknown territories, exploring Other cultures and Other constructions of self trying to envisage ourselves in someone else's body, situated in a foreign society, performing their tasks and their rituals. Despite all attempts, our ventures at present represent fairly superficial excursions. One particularly popular destination is the Aegean, because its rich suite of iconographic material has suggested to generations of scholars the possibility that a very different set of gender relations was operative. I would like to firstly address current developments in feminist and masculinist theory and their relationship to archaeology. I will then examine more closely the Aegean to see how sex and gender have been constructed by archaeologists in the twentieth century and how this relates to current ideas in feminist theory.

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First Wave, Second Wave, Third Wave?

I want to begin by clarifying some of the theoretical issues which directly affect archaeology in the 90s and explore the potentials of extending our horizons beyond the discourse of gender. Whilst academic feminism has experienced two waves of theorising, and is currently engaged in what I consider a third, archaeology is still immersed in the first wave. In fact, archaeology has been a latecomer to the concept of gender (see papers in Gero and Conkey 1991; Walde and Willows 1991). Within the discipline the contributions of feminism and gender research have been considered to be the same thing, whereas it is more correct to view them as separate entities, though there is often a significant overlap. For example, a scholar can be interested in gender relations without being overtly feminist in their political outlook. For the most part archaeologists have been concerned with one central project of First Wave feminism, which was essentially

to restore women's visibility and to politicise their reinstatement. This was by no means the only rationale behind the First Wave, though this is how it has been defined historically. So in archaeology, the feminist influence instigated various studies which focused upon the position of women in the past, whilst simultaneously highlighting the inherent male bias of the discipline. Many of the influential anthropological studies of the time sought to explain the seemingly universal subordination of women, and it appears that archaeology also contributed to the long view. It must be said that in archaeology this First Wave did not encompass the full spectrum of gender, in that it focused on women and only recently have Third sex/genders and children been considered. Constructions of masculinity in specific cultural and historical contexts have not really been addressed as yet. In sum, archaeology still continues to engage in gendered studies which focus on the identification and elaboration of women for the most part. Few have questioned this phenomenon or acknowledged that this approach fails to

provide any radical departure from the traditional ways of doing archaeology. Taking a cynical view, it could be said that one focus has simply been replaced by another.

Developments from Second Wave feminism, masculinist theory¹, queer theory² and the many different positions adopted within those fields have not been adopted by archaeology to date. To illustrate this point, consider the way archaeologists have accepted the Western binary construction of sex and gender and have then automatically applied it to past cultures. Most anthropologists today realise that such a simple dual model is not applicable in living cultures across the globe today.

However, in archaeology most scholars still view sex as a fixed concept, based on the 'objective' findings of biology. This is contrasted with the socially constructed category of gender, acting as a flexible layer on top of the stable category sex. Sex itself is perceived as another dualism, where male and female are the only oppositional possibilities. The sex:gender dichotomy is paralleled by other dualisms we are all familiar with such as nature:culture, active:passive, male:female. Many of these

1: Masculinist theory is usually part of sociology or the social sciences more generally and is formulated to study the male subject and that engendered construction in various times, locations and cultures. It is not androcentric in the negative sense and it was largely influenced by, and has much in common with, feminism.

2: I have followed David Halperin's definition of queer (Halperin 1995), which acquires meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. It demarcates a position vis-a-vis the normative not restricted to lesbians and gay men, but in fact to anyone who feels marginalised because of their sexual practices.



Fragment of a wall painting, some 60cm high from the palace of Knossos, Crete. The scene possibly depicts a bull leaping event.

All illustrations by Billie Walker-John.

binaries can be traced to the philosophy of Descartes, though some go back to Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.

Archaeology needs to be aware of more recent formulations of sex, such as those proposed by historians of science or philosophers respectively. Foucault's much debated work on the social construction of sex (1978, 1986, 1985) has been taken up by radical scholars of queer theory such as Judith Butler (1993) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 1995). Thomas Laqueur's influential study (Laqueur 1990) has further shown that prior to the Enlightenment a one-sex model held sway, and this was later replaced by with the binary structure of two separate sexes we now regard as objective truth. So in fact contemporary science constructs its own knowledge which then inevitably spills over into social relations, yet neither operate in isolation. The

question my own research has prompted me to ask is whether we really need two socially constructed categories, sex and gender? As Grosz has stated, "this notion of gender now seems largely irrelevant or redundant, a term unnecessary for describing the vast social arrangements, contexts, and variations in the ways in which we live, give meaning to, and enact sex" (Grosz 1995:212). For me, gender is an inadequate category because it fails to account for sexuality and sexual orientation. If we do dispense with gender, as I have suggested and have attempted to do within my own research (Meskell 1996), this means that the concept of sex will have to be examined in its cultural context at a highly specific level, taking into account other constituting factors such as age, status, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, marital status etc. which operate at a highly individualistic level. This presents archaeology with a



Faience figurine known as the Snake Goddess (!), also from the palace of Knossos, c. 1600 BC.

highly complex strategy where nothing can be assumed or taken for granted on the basis of our own Western twentieth century categories.

Fragmented Feminisms

I now want to examine how feminist theory has moved beyond the sex:gender classification. Second wave feminism has made virulent attacks on its predecessor, for the racism, classism, and heterosexist agenda which underscores its own accounts. Many have claimed that feminists created oppressive, totalising narratives which sought to unify all women on the basis of a supposed biological unity. These similarly failed to factor in the many differences which individual women experienced and do experience today. Feminist theory now encompasses multiple positions initiated by Third World feminists, black activists and radical lesbian

feminists. Note that neither sex nor gender as originally defined adequately account for the full range of sexual difference and the full range of diverse sexual identities. In the 90s feminists do not claim to present a unified front and this would be detrimental to the overall project: surely the opening up of the discipline to allow a spectrum of positions marks a truly radical break with traditional forms of conservative, authoritarian scholarship.

To many, feminism might seem a fractured socio-political movement, though it is via its fragmentation that the real potential of the approach especially for archaeology, becomes manifest. This essentially means a shift from engaging with broad classes of data (grouping all women, men, children, elites, slaves etc. together and treating them as the same) to studies which seek to identify individual constructions of self in all their variability. This entails moving from essentialist, generalising tendencies to more individual formulations which seek to integrate sex with class, status, age etc. as they intersect for individual people. Herein lies the possibilities for Third Wave feminism and for new theoretical developments in archaeology. To recap my position, if we continue to regard sex, or gender, as the overriding variable we are limiting the contributions of a holistic, informed feminism which seeks to incorporate the spectrum of difference. Not only does this represent a self-defeating exercise, but gender itself pales into an out-dated category which has little theoretical application.

This might seem a radical departure and one which was derived from highly personal readings of radical feminist and philosophical texts, rather than from archaeological literature, for example. As I indicated before, archaeologists have not yet incorporated these new theories. However, this initial gender-scepticism resulted from

my dissertation research at the Egyptian Bronze age site of Deir el Medina. My primary focus is social relations incorporating settlement and cemetery data, which encompasses the experiences of individuals. Though it probably began as a female-oriented rebalancing of history it soon became apparent that simple gender dichotomies were seemingly useless, in isolation, for making sense of the complex picture of daily life and death. In many contexts, including my own material, sex cannot be isolated out as the key principle. The theoretical observations I have offered here come equally from the experience of doing archaeology, as they have from reading highly politicised feminist texts. Just as the insights of an informed feminist position might add to archaeology's body of theory, so too might new developments in masculinist theory, which also concentrate on constructions of self, identity and difference.

Multiple Masculinities

At this point I would like to introduce the potential contributions of masculinist theory, which is a disciplinary movement within the social sciences. It should be noted at the outset that the term masculinist should not be conflated with androcentrism or male oppression, rather it is an engendered concept which seeks to formulate the masculine subject (Knapp 1995). There is an ever increasing corpus of literature on the male subject, though the impact of such research on archaeology is negligible. One of the primary issues being addressed is the social and cultural construction of maleness, or the effects of being sexed male in contemporary society as well as other cultural and temporal contexts.

Within Western tradition male is synonymous with reason and mind. In our society reason and emotion have been separated out as binary

opposites, so men are left with an unreasonable form of reason (Seidler 1994). Men are supposedly removed from the emotional sphere. Within Western traditions of philosophy the body and emotions are devalued and made subjective concerns of personal life, and not validated as sources of knowledge. The mind:body split has had damaging effects on male constructions of self as well as female. Many men do not feel this to be a privileged position, since these social constructions have restricted their full experience as individuals first and foremost.

There is much evidence for cross-cultural and historical diversity for sex roles which challenge the binary status quo: situations where homosexuality is accepted majority practice; where men are not normally aggressive; and where mothers do not predominate in child care. Such observations challenge contemporary notions of what men do and suggest other alternatives according to time, place and culture. The implications of masculinist writings on the formulation of selves for archaeology are manifold. First, it illustrates divergent and multiple masculinities, and by extension femininities, rather than opting for the traditional dualisms. Further, it has investigated a cross-section of new historical and cultural studies on masculinities from an anthropological perspective. However, the latter is in an early phase and requires more comprehensive studies to make a fuller impact. Such work potentially brings fresh insights into the construction of identities, individuals and personalised experience: all of this adds to the social dimension of a postprocessual archaeology. Potentially, a well-formulated masculinist perspective could introduce a significant proportion of the archaeological community into wider discussions of sex, sexuality and social relations. At

present, few would disagree that this field of expertise is currently predominated by women (Meskell 1995:84). Thus the exploration of masculinities is not merely an excursion into the world of men, or relations between the sexes, it is an examination of how individuals experience life within specific social and cultural contexts (see Knapp 1995; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994).

Touring Uncharted Waters

In the preceding sections I have endeavoured to highlight the theoretical potentials for incorporating developments in the social sciences into the field of archaeology. I want to now to specifically focus on the construction of Aegean archaeology and how it has dealt with the concept of gender. Gender tourism in the Mediterranean has largely focused on representational evidence, primarily in ritual and elite contexts. This takes the form of frescoes like those of Knossos and the other palatial excavations, or figurines from ritual or palace sites. Both of these domains present problems for the reconstruction of real life experiences of individuals in any social sense. These objects are representations first and foremost and do not derive from day-to-day contexts. These concerns have been addressed at length by various strands of feminism; for instance, what relationship do specially constructed images of women (by males or females) have with the lives of real women? This raises two issues particularly pertinent to the Mediterranean archaeologies. The first is the reliance on visual representations, which leads to general observances which are likely to be totally unrepresentative for the majority of the population. Tied to this is a preoccupation with the surface in the form of clothing, hairstyles, make-up and jewellery, and this has been



A clay shrine model from Archanes, Crete, dating to the Protogeometric period.

widely criticised in the social sciences for its superficiality and inability to encompass real individuals. What I find worrisome is that this is the very body of data that archaeologists have viewed as fertile testing grounds for concepts of gender: iconography may never provide the scope with which to satisfactorily allow access to the lives of individual people. There is a significant discrepancy or slippage between 'woman' as representation and women as historical beings and as the subject of real relations (McNay 1992:67). The same could be said of men, children, foreigners, slaves, in fact any group which tends to be represented in a standardised or formulaic way. Though artistic depictions of men and women are evocative and compelling, we should not be duped into imagining that this is the most informative data set from which to extract social information pertaining to those groups. Added to this is my second concern, which revolves around scholarly interests which emphasise the performance aspects of Bronze Age ritual, which is seem to be both highly regular and elite, derived from frescoes and figurines. Again it

is pitched at a small and unrepresentative sample, rather than attempting to locate daily life, roles and activities experienced by the broad, and highly variable range of individuals in Aegean societies. As I will argue, our field of study should be shifted toward more comprehensive excavation and interpretation in settlement and mortuary spheres.

The point is a simple one. Gender studies in the Mediterranean as a whole have tended to focus strongly on the representational level, rather than upon social relations between individuals. This is not to detract from the informative findings at hand, but one must question if we are witnessing intentionality rather than reality. How far can iconography reflect experience? More generally, one has to ask why gender has followed these trajectories in many archaeologies: Mediterranean, Near Eastern, and Egyptian. I have always assumed this is because its seductive media and visual qualities are more attractive than dealing with the somewhat more mundane domestic and mortuary material. However, it is that mundane material which is exactly what is required to remedy the serious gaps in our archaeological knowledge. Settlement data undoubtedly provides the best context for information about individuals within various social classes and their corresponding social dynamics. The interactions between the individual and their social framework should provide a flexible relationship, where we can say something general about the particular runnings of a society and also individual responses and practices within that framework. Household data will be an invaluable source as would mortuary material from tombs where individuals have been aged and sexed. The latter should also be possible within the Aegean context, and only requires a shift of emphasis toward these data as a viable

source for interpreting social dynamics such as the interplay of age, sex, status, class and ethnicity etc. From my own analyses, the key concept here is variability rather than homogeneity.

Concluding this brief tour I would like to suggest that the positions presented by feminists, archaeologists and pagans alike are often at odds with each other. Each has their own narratives and in most cases there are many different narratives which fall under the headings of paganism, feminism or archaeology. There is no consensus within fields and this should be seen as a positive attribute rather than a negative one. Similarly there is usually little meeting of minds between fields, and it has become increasingly clear that some styles of feminism want very specific pictures of the past which archaeology simply cannot provide. Some pagans and Goddess worshippers also desire a particular vision of the past to be verified by archaeologists and often times the evidence has been to the contrary. Substantiating matriarchy is a good example and one that cannot be verified by archaeological evidence whether in the Neolithic Near East or Bronze Age Aegean. This inability does not change people's views or beliefs and as an archaeologist I now question whether our evidence is actually welcomed or whether it is redundant to many who have a well-defined belief system. Moreover, it may always be the case that our disciplinary boundaries keep us from encroaching on other territories. For some time I have hoped that archaeologists would become more aware of how our field is perceived and used by other groups and to have greater contact with them, my own area of interest being with various branches of feminism, Goddess worship and its relationship to archaeology (Meskell 1995). This article represents another attempt to strengthen that contact.

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Women *on the* RAMPAGE

In the early years of the twentieth century, Sir Benjamin Stone published several volumes of splendid photographs which he called *Records of National Life and History*, and the first of these was devoted to festivals, ceremonies and customs. It contains pictures of little girls in clean pinafores, small boys immaculately turned out, dignified bearded gentlemen in bowler hats and stately old ladies in bonnets, with one or two quaint but restrained local characters. These are seen receiving gifts from charities, celebrating May Day, clipping the church at Painswick, or gathering for the Hallaton Hare Pie festival. Here we have folklore as approved by the establishment, and the fact that the subjects had to remain motionless while the slow process of early photography went on adds to the atmosphere of picturesque respectability.

However, we know that popular customs were not all like that, even in Sir Benjamin's time. There are many accounts of wild activities and outbursts of rioting by young men - and sometimes older ones - bonding together to take part in individual trials of strength, contests between neighbouring groups, or attempts to get money for a party or drinking bout. While delighting the folklorist, such customs were less welcome to residents at the receiving end, whose fences were smashed, shop windows broken, or gardens vandalised; they were usually sternly denounced in the local press, declared to encourage hooliganism and drunkenness, and eventually banned by the local authorities.

In 1934 a new significance was given to such dubious activities by the German scholar Otto Höfler who, in a book called *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* traced such customs back to medieval times and earlier, and argued that they were associated with the cult of the dead and the god Wodan. His theory was that the rioting youths of earlier times

wore masks to represent supernatural figures, and so gave rise to many legends of troops of demons and visitants from the Otherworld. Such practices, he believed, were kept alive in Christian times by what were virtually secret societies, and have left their mark on popular customs of northern Europe. This book made a great impression at the time, and caused much debate in Germany and Scandinavia, while bringing hitherto despised customs under a new spotlight.

A member of the Vienna school to which Höfler belonged, Richard Wolfram, wrote an article in 1933 suggesting that we should perhaps look for similar acts of bonding and aggressive behaviour among women, and gave some striking examples. I was delighted to come across these, because I had been looking for indications from northern Europe of women coming together in pre-Christian times to celebrate the cults of the goddesses, and

I wanted to discover exactly what happened on those tantalising occasions when it was said that women got together and men were forced to keep well away. Since it was the men who made the records, they were liable to write disapprovingly and vaguely of wild dances, lewd talk, songs too disgusting to record, feasting and drinking, with occasional indignant outbursts when some unfortunate man crossed the path of the rampaging women.

We hear of such goings-on at the festivals of Demeter in ancient Greece, again reported vaguely, because men were not permitted to witness them. Here there is no doubt that such occasions were linked with the cult of the goddess. They took place on her festivals; for instance, we hear of women meeting for a communal meal and games at the midwinter festival of Demeter, when they exchanged shameful jokes and sayings, and produced models of male and female genitals in pastry. Such activities were linked with the myth of the goddess, said to have been consoled by bawdy jokes when she was mourning for her lost daughter and wandering in search of her.

In an illuminating book on the festivals of Demeter, an American scholar, Allaine Brumfield (1981: 123) raises the question of why women should deliberately choose to indulge in sexual jokes and uninhibited behaviour in a

wholly feminine gathering from which men were sternly excluded. She makes a comparison with the 'shower' held by women in the United States for a bride, when presents were given, and small cloth dolls with exaggerated sexual organs were displayed. It is assumed that one of the instincts behind it is the encouragement of fertility in the earth and in the community, but this is perhaps too simple an explanation. Why should they expel men to carry out such private rites, and on what occasions does this take place?

The evidence which Wolfram collected from small rural communities in northern Germany and Denmark invites comparison with the rituals of the ancient goddess. Although sometimes connected with a certain day in the year, like many of the men's wild outbursts, the most striking examples of aggressive behaviour comes from companies of women practising special skills and contributing to the work of the community, or celebrating childbirth.

In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer has made an invaluable collection of harvest customs from the British Isles, linking these with similar evidence brought together by Mannhardt from France and Germany. Frazer was interested in examples of the reapers attacking strangers in the harvest field, sometimes holding them or the farmer for whom they worked up to ransom, because he wanted to explain such instances as evidence for human sacrifice in earlier times. However he discreetly glosses over the fact that it was often the women rather than the men who indulged in such violent and threatening behaviour, a point noted by Mannhardt. The women played an essential part in getting in the harvest; they worked in the harvest field and were responsible for binding the sheaves; it was their job to attempt to drench the reaper getting to the farm with the last sheaf, and also to make the

corn dolly from the last ears of corn. The farmer's wife or a woman chosen to be Queen of the Harvest might have the place of honour in the harvest procession, or at the harvest supper and dance.

In a fascinating study of an outspoken medieval poem by Dunbar about women and marriage, *A Midsummer Eve's Dream*, the Australian scholar A.D. Hope (1970: 186-7) suggests that the concept behind the attack on a stranger might not have been that of a ritual killing but rather the obtaining of a harvest bridegroom. He quotes a description of what went on in Fife when a man entered the field at harvest time:

'... before he knew where he was, he was seized by two or three females and laid on his back. Then one of them held him down and laid herself flat on the person, and another female tumbled over the two as they lay. This was called Kipping and the man after he was allowed to get up, was expected to give a small amount of money by way of providing some refreshment.'

In Germany Wolfram collected examples of bonding by women associated with flax-beating, which used to be women's work. Sometimes youths with whips tried to frighten the women on their way to the flax-beating room, but they were expected to respond with vigour. No man was allowed in the room where the flax was dried, and intruders might be tied to a tree trunk and rolled down a slope, or rubbed with rough flax fibres, or smothered in kisses by the girls unless they saved themselves by a fine. Strangers encountered by the women might be thrown to the ground while they marched over them, or have chaff or prickly flax fibres pushed into their trousers.

Another women's activity was spinning, and the spinning rooms were strictly closed to men in some parts of Germany and Austria, with threats that

their trousers would be taken off or even that they would be castrated if they broke this rule. Another body of working women to whom men were forced to pay respect were the professional laundresses and the women who gathered at the public washhouse, or in earlier days at a lake or river. The wash-place was well-known as a stronghold of gossip, a place to air grievances and discuss local affairs, while eating and drinking together, as Yvonne Verdier (1976) has shown in her illuminating studies of the activities of women in remote parts of rural France. Male folklorists, she claims, were intimidated by the behaviour of the washerwomen, and simply condemned them out of hand, without trying to find out what really went on. Certainly the men kept well away to avoid abuse and insults.

While men were accustomed to get together in the smithy, cafes, inns or clubs or places where games were played, women met at the washing-place, the public oven and the bread shop. With the exception of the church, the places where they could meet were all connected with their work.

The occasion when they might utterly lose their authority within the household was after the birth of a child. The Danish folklorist Ewart Tang Christensen, a man of the people who put up with much discomfort and hardship working among the poorest country folk in remote areas where scholars were unwilling to go, produced striking evidence on this topic. In the nineteenth century, ten or twelve local women would take over a house after a birth, and the husband was forced to wait on them and give them gifts. Soon after the birth a 'Konegild' (women's feast) was held, and all the local married women took part. This was something quite distinct from a baptismal

party; it was a wild gathering in an upstairs room and did not bring much benefit to the new mother. One of the women leaders would slip down to give her good wishes and take precautions to protect the child against witchcraft, while the company upstairs feasted and got drunk. On their way home afterwards they played all kinds of pranks on men, and sometimes on childless couples, perhaps stopping up a chimney or running away with a wagon, breaking it up and flinging the pieces on to a roof.

In one place the Konegild was usually held nine days after the child's baptism, and if the rampaging women came across a man working in the fields, they were likely to take away his food and pull off his trousers. They used to go around with a *barselpot* (birth pot) collecting money for food and drink for this event. One informant whose brother was a smith told Christensen that the smithy was once invaded by the women with their pot, and when they became angry his brother only got rid of them by seizing a piece of red-hot iron in the tongs and driving them out.

Other accounts of crazy outbursts come from North Schleswig. Here after a birth a band of women went round snatching people's caps and destroying those of the men or filling them with filth, while they also seized hold of passers-by and made them dance wildly. In one case they entered a school and made the teacher and the boys dance with them, 'such a dance as I have never seen before or since', according to one folklorist. They were also said to tear carts to pieces, let horses loose, and break into houses to take food, singing and hallooing so that they could be heard everywhere.

Such accounts from recent times throw more light on isolated passages from early literature which have puzzled scholars. There is a Latin

account from Durham in the fourteenth century, said to come from a Franciscan friar who had been in Denmark. He told how after a birth took place there the women danced and sang, and made a little man called Boui out of straw which they took round with lewd gestures, calling on him to sing. This tale has a cautionary ending: the straw puppet sang out in such a terrible voice that a number of women fell dead from fright.

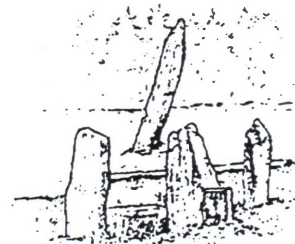
Sometimes the women were pitted against the men in good-humoured rivalry. The eating of first-fruits in Scandinavia and in the Hebrides was celebrated by such competition, as related by the Norwegian folklorist Svalle Solheim (1956: 147ff). In Norway the girls prepared rich cream dishes and cheeses in special shapes (one would like to know more about what kind of shapes), when they came back to the farms after their summer in the mountains with the cattle. The men were invited to partake, and some of them used to try and steal the porridge-pot, while in the Hebrides the boys tried to steal the first of the wild carrots, picked and washed by the women before the sun touched them, to offer to male visitors and strangers.

I should dearly like to learn more about a custom recorded in the *Gentlemen's Magazine* of 1779 from a small Kent village, a week before Shrove Tuesday (Opie and Tatem 1989: 201). A band of girls between the ages of 5 and 18 were said to burn a Holly Boy stolen from the boys, while elsewhere the boys did the same with an Ivy Girl. They made a great deal of noise, and the local people said that this happened every year. The holly and ivy as male and female symbols are mentioned in medieval carols:

Nay, Ivy, nay,
hyt shal not be, iwys;
let Holy hafe the maystry
[mastery]
as the maner ys.

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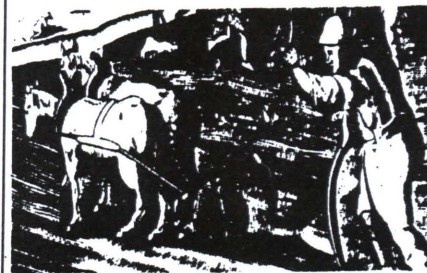
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Easter Heaving c.1800. From Doc Rowe collection.

In *Notes and Queries* of 1871 it is reported from Derbyshire that if prickly holly is brought into the house at Christmas the husband will be master, but if it is the smooth kind the wife will have the mastery. A later contribution of 1881 prudently cautioned a mixture of the two types 'so that affairs in the household would go on . . . in an even prosperous way', but the writer adds that he has known women who took care to gather the holly the previous day and bring it in at dawn on Christmas morning so that the odds would be in their favour (Opie and Tatem 1989: 200).

At certain festivals the women had a right to their own celebrations in contrast with those of the men or of the community in general. At Gladback, on the border between Holland and Germany, a special 'Women's Day' was held in Carnival time, when the women were given the keys of the Town

Hall, and went round dancing and singing and cutting off men's ties. Some German villages also had a traditional Women's Day, when they were allowed to collect money for a feast, and there are records of a secret women's court held at Wurttemberg and also in Alsace for the choosing of the local midwife.

Wolfram found records of a 'Woman's Day' (*Weibertag*) in three villages, when women, some wearing masks, came together carrying food. According to one account, they took two barrels of wine from the communal cellar, while every inn-keeper provided them with a loaf, and the mayor gave them butter. They were also allowed twelve gelder to buy a goat, which they decorated with bells, and then went about with music and got up to all kinds of mischief. The men were expected to keep indoors during the evening.

There are instances from France of women being allowed

to order the men around on Shrove Tuesday morning, up to the time of the midday Angelus, but it was said that the men usually contrived to get this rung early. Again in the Rhineland there was one day in the year when women had authority, while in the Franche Comte their authority was said to last throughout May.

At Hocktide, the Monday and Tuesday after Low Sunday in mid-Lent, there were special sports before the Reformation, and much wild horseplay, according to the Bishop of Worcester in the fifteenth century (Hole 1978: 144ff). Sometimes the days were known as Binding Monday and Tuesday, since on Monday the women set out with rope to bind every man they could catch, demanding a forfeit before they set him free, and on Tuesday the position was reversed and the men bound the women. This was said, somewhat improbably, to commemorate a massacre of the Danes in late Anglo-Saxon times, and a play about it was performed for Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth, which pleased her very much; in this the Danes twice overcame the English, and then were conquered and led captive by the women. The ransoms were probably meant originally to provide a feast, but later went to parish expenses, and it appears from the church-wardens' accounts that the women collected a much larger sum than the men.

Another spring custom of this kind was the popular Easter Lifting or Heaving, which continued in north-west England and along the Welsh border until the late nineteenth century (Hole 1978: 99ff). On Easter Monday the young men went round to houses with a stout chair decorated with greenery, and the women sat on it in turn and were hoisted up three times and turned

round. The lifters could then claim either a kiss or a small sum of money as a forfeit, and the lifting went on till noon. Next day the women lifted the men, although (as with the Binding days) the order might be reversed in some places. On the whole this was a pleasant custom in villages, approved of by the church; it was said - again improbably - to commemorate the Resurrection. Girls might pretend to be frightened and bar the doors, but made sure that the young men could get through the windows.

However, it became a rougher affair in the towns, where people were seized and made to pay a ransom. At Kidderminster, for instance, ropes were stretched across the streets to catch passers-by. Baring Gould has a story of an unfortunate school inspector who visited Warrington on Easter Monday and was set upon by mill girls who carried him through the town, leaving him in a shattered state, while a friend of his was lifted at Wednesbury and kissed by women working in the coal pit until his face was black. In Manchester the custom was forbidden in 1784, but to no effect. A century later however a man in the Wirral brought a action against men who came to lift his wife, which resulted in apologies and payment of costs. A version of this lifting is recorded in the harvest field, and it was probably originally connected with the growth of crops.

Thus we find evidence for women bonding together and making their power felt in the community, although this has only occasionally been recorded by male folklorists and social historians. It is among the simple country people or the workers in the towns that it seems to have flourished most, and indeed Martine Segalen (1983) claims that in the countryside women had far greater independence, and there was more

acceptance of equality between husband and wife than in the bourgeoisie. It seems that men had most reason to fear women whose particular lines of work brought them together in a body, as when employed in binding sheaves at harvest time, flax-beating, spinning or laundry work, as well as on occasions of childbirth, the province in which until very recently women reigned supreme. These are precisely the areas associated with the pre-Christian goddesses, and it seems that here women are guarding their own mysteries, just as men guarded theirs when they got together for hunting, fishing or ploughing. In a general way such ritual behaviour, often breaking normal patterns, promoted fertility and well-being in the community; it also brought good luck to undertakings - including childbirth - known to be necessary for survival, and guarded against the many risks and dangers which threatened.

Women turned particularly to the goddesses for protection of this kind, and a study of bonding occasions among women may therefore lead to better understanding of the cults of the goddesses in northern Europe in early times. This does not mean accepting the ideas of continuity between pagan customs and popular traditions centuries later, a theory once popular among folklorists like Sir Benjamin Stone, who traced May festivities directly back to the Roman rites of Flora, and the making of the Kern Baby out of the last sheaf to the festival of Ceres. Work done since his time on the history and origins of local customs has disabused us of such neat assumptions. We are beginning however to realise that some examples of particular ritual symbolism may startle us by mirroring that of far earlier times. As Ralph Merrifield (1987: xiii) wisely declared: 'Superstitious ritual often survived the religious beliefs that gave birth to it, and

was reinterpreted in the light of current beliefs or adapted to relieve new fears.' Such instances may teach us much, and lead us to ask the right questions.

I should like to stress the importance of the recent work of women scholars like Yvonne Verdier (1976) and Martine Segalen (1983) in France, who have broken new ground in their studies of the part played by women in small rural communities. Here I believe we have a new and exciting link between popular rites and traditions and the old traditions and myths of the goddesses, so often neglected by the men who investigated folklore and mythology.

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A Sacred Island

A feminist perspective on bronze age Crete

SUSAN EVASDAUGHTER's interest in Crete grew after a visit there in 1983 and her amazement at how the island's ancient sacred past was being misrepresented. In the late 1980s she wrote and published two booklets on bronze age Crete. These have been revised and greatly expanded and published at the end of last year by Heart of Albion Press under the title Crete Reclaimed (see back cover of this issue for details).

Although classical Greece is widely accepted as the cradle of European civilisation, the Arian settlers who were to become the Greeks were barbarians when they invaded the Aegean. Their systems of learning were appropriated from the sophisticated indigenous tribes whom they subjugated. The ideological struggle that accompanied the overshadowing of these earlier cultures is recorded in the Greek myths and the struggle for power between Zeus and the Great Goddess in the form of Hera.

Much of the action of these epic tales of manly daring-do takes place on Crete because the invaders found the islanders' commitment to their deity so difficult to subdue. Rodney Castleden (1996) describes the early civilisation of Crete as an example of one of the occasions when 'the energies of that ocean [of human culture] have gathered together into towering waves of achievement.'

The 'waves of achievement' of the bronze age Cretans towered and glittered for two millennia, from around 3000 to 1100 BC. It was from this advanced culture that the Greeks derived the political, philosophical, legal, mathematical, medical and scientific systems that they are credited with inventing.

As prehistoric Aegean specialist George Thomson put it (1978), 'Behind the work of the humane poets who composed the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* lies an age of brutality and violence, in which the bold pioneers of private property had ransacked the opulent, heratic (sacred), sophisticated civilisation of the

Minoan matriarchate.'

The revelation of the wonders of prehistoric Cretan culture began with Sir Arthur Evans who inappropriately assigned to it the title 'Minoan'. He derived this epithet from the Minos of classical Greek legend. The term is a generic one similar to Pharaoh (ruler). Scholars are now in agreement that Evans' restorations and interpretations of Knossos are greatly flawed. Most of them blithely persist, however, in following his nomenclature for the many buildings in and around Knossos and their rooms and, of course, the title he gave to the whole civilisation. Given his background and the constraints of Victorian archaeology, however, we should be amazed at the

degree of open-mindedness Evans was able to bring to his unravelling of the meaning of ancient Cretan culture. We will return to what Evans thought of the evidence he uncovered at Knossos but before doing so it is worth considering some theoretical problems.

Eracentricity

Although the bronze age Cretans developed a range of scripts and printing systems, we have no comprehensible written records of their culture. We must therefore be wary in our interpretations. Most of us who are interested in matters archaeological are conscious of the dangers of superimposing attitudes and values that are a product of our own culture onto that of another, the concept of ethnocentricity.

Archaeologists are now more aware than ever before that when we view prehistory through our own cultural spectacles we need to be wary of ethnocentricity (or as I prefer, eracentricity). In 1991 anthropologists Joan Gero and Margaret Conkey edited a collection of papers, *Engendering Archaeology*, concerned with gender bias in archaeology. Oxford archaeologist Lucia Nixon, who is currently engaged in working on finds from bronze age sites in western Crete, has made an amusing but serious assault on gender bias in

archaeology (1994) and post-processual archaeologists M. Shanks and C. Tilley (1992), J. Thomas (1991) and I. Hodder (1990) question the entrenched precepts of their discipline and appeal to colleagues to be more sensitive to the inherent 'otherness' of the subject matter.

In an attempt to offer a more woman-centred approach to prehistory there have been more popular approaches: E. Gadon's *The Once and Future Goddess* (1989), R. Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987) and R. Castleden's *The Knossos Labyrinth* (1990) all challenged entrenched ideas about the nature of bronze age Crete.

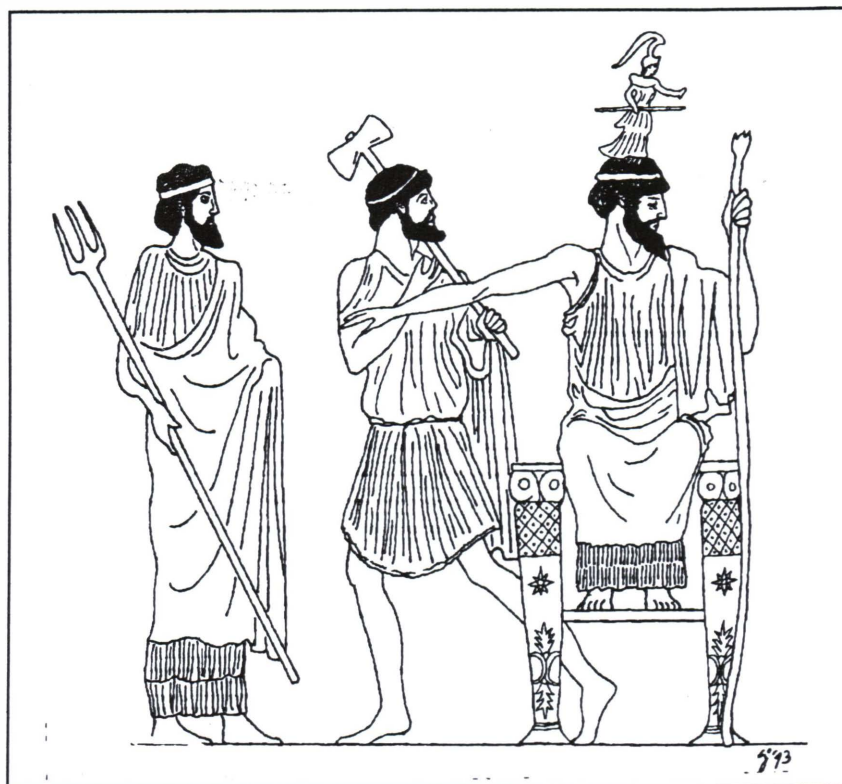
The debate around the embrace of the Goddess and matriarchy in the New Age and Women's Studies literature and whether the evidence from 'critical contextual analysis' (Fagin 1992) can substantiate such enthusiasm has taken on new energy recently. As Lynn Meskell (1995) puts it, 'We should not ignore the possibility of matriarchy; rather we are not clear what form such evidence would take.' Sadly much of this debate has focused around discrediting the work of Marija Gimbutas.

A Challenge to the Status Quo

When Evans excavated Knossos at the beginning of this century, he uncovered and, to his credit, acknowledged a surfeit of evidence which demonstrated the preeminence of women in bronze age Crete.

'Women among the Minoans took the higher rank in society just as their great Goddess took the place later assigned to Zeus.' Evans (1921)

His views are shared by many other scholars:



Attic vase, 600–400 BC. A symbolic representation of the establishment of patriarchy. Zeus gives birth to Athena seated on the sacred throne of the Goddess, Posidon and Hephaistos hold the trident and labyris both sacred symbols of the old religion. This new patriarchal trinity each have something which was previously exclusively female, something they have stolen.

'It is very likely however that it was a Queen-Priestess who sat on the throne rather than the king because the deity whom she represented is usually shown accompanied by griffons . . .'

Michailidou (1982)

'The throne room may not have been the seat of Minos but rather have been used by a priestess of the Minoan Goddess.'

Cadogan (1976)

'The Throne room . . . was evidently used for ritual and the Queen as representative of the goddess may have sat upon the throne there.'

Hood (1971)

'Perhaps the last great king of Phaistos was a Queen.'

Higgins (1967)

'The longest section of the [processional] fresco that is susceptible to reconstruction clearly shows a female . . . as the central focal figure . . . the Palanquin Fresco and the Grandstand Fresco similarly show female figures as the most important . . . The lady of the Labyrinth and other deities honoured in the temple were, it seems, attended by an elite of powerful priestesses.'

Castleden (1990)

With rare exceptions, however, archaeologists and other scholars, including Evans himself, have consistently ignored the implications of these findings and blindly sought proof of a King of Knossos, the equivalent of the Minos of the classical Greek legends. Such scholars are so entrenched in their own era and culture that



Cretan Ritual and Symbolism.

Artist's impression of a priestess performing rituals at an altar with pillar mounted labyris rising from Horns of Consecration, topped by birds. (Based on a sarcophagus from Ayia Triada.)

Cretan Mysteries

Despite the amazing array of buildings, art works, frescoes and script, the culture of bronze age Crete is still swathed in enigma. There is mounting evidence that women were pre-eminent in this culture, that it was focused around the Great Goddess and that the Cretans were capable of such innovatory and respected architectural achievements that were imitated by the Egyptians. Their accomplishments in art and

textiles were unmatched and they lived in peace for 2000 years. But there are still many unanswered questions. What caused all the great religious centres to be destroyed in 1450 BC? This can no longer be successfully linked to the massive explosion of the volcano on Thera (Santorini). Recent theorists have placed this geological event no later than 1759. Following the 1450 temple destructions and the arrival of large numbers of Mycenaean on the island, how did life change at the important

centres of Knossos, Arkhanes and Hania that were still in use? What great mysteries are recorded in the cameo scenes of ritual so exquisitely portrayed on the seal stones and signet rings that were once worn by the great priestess-queens who guided this culture? What of the mass of children's skeletons found by Peter Warren in a building, with no funereal associations, close to Knossos? And who was responsible for the human sacrifice at the temple of the Cave of the Winds (Anemospeila)?

I have considered the evidence for some of these questions in *Crete Reclaimed - A Feminist Exploration of Bronze Age Crete* (1996). My own theory about Crete's demise is that as seasoned travellers and traders the Cretans were aware of a changing climate in the Aegean and that the labyris, the butterfly of peace and equality, was soon to be replaced by the sword of death and domination. In order to preserve the sanctity of their sacred temples the great priestess queens caused them to be razed to the ground. In doing so they left us a legacy of a vision of a way of life now lost to us, a tantalising glimpse of an island paradise that has been equated with the Garden of Eden and the idyll of Atlantis.

We know who these great leaders were. They, or their counterparts are represented in the frescoes of La Parisienne, the Ladies in Blue, the Processional Queen, the Ladies in the Temple fresco, the Queen in the garden at Ayia Triada, the many regal women of Thera, Tiryns and Mycenae and those whose remains were discovered in the splendid queenly burials at Phourni and Ayia Triada.

Crete Reclaimed is an in-depth look at the daily life of the bronze age Cretans, their art, religion and symbolism, gender roles and why and how this Golden Age of peace and

harmony came to such a dramatic end. It also focuses on bronze age Crete as a stunning example of how a woman-centred society developed an advanced culture whose main purpose was to celebrate a female deity.

Why Crete?

There are many reasons why we would want to further our knowledge about bronze age Crete. It formed the foundations for Greek civilisation and hence our own, survived as a peace-loving nation that celebrated a female deity far longer than other cultures because of its island location and its achievements were remarkable in many fields. But aside from any of these considerations, anyone with an ounce of spiritual sensitivity need only visit the archaeological museum in Iraklion or the Arthur Evans Room at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and see the works of art, experience Knossos, Skotino or Melidhoni sacred cave or read about the wonders of the royal burials at Arkhanes in order to know the answer to this question.

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The Crocus Picker from Xestes 3, Thera. 1759 or earlier. Part of a scene set in a hilly landscape where two elegantly dressed women (priestesses) collect saffron. In another scene from room 3a (first floor) these are heaped at the feet of the Goddess. The symbols that border this figure's bodice are also found on Cretan pottery and in the decorative lower fresco border of the Throne Room at Knossos. The tassels which hang from her sleeves resemble labrys/waz lily shapes which are also common symbolic forms in Cretan sacred art.

All the illustrations seen here together with over 70 others which feature in *Crete Reclaimed* are by Billie Walker-John. Billie also provided the previously-unpublished illustrations for Lynn Meskell's article in this issue of *At the Edge*. She can be contacted at 7 Cleveland Park, Risca, Gwent NP1 6RD.

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Weaving the WORLD

This article is in many respects a direct continuation of 'Cosmic homes' in At the Edge No.5. Indeed, there is a paragraph which acts as a specific springboard. For those who would like to be prompted:

The Kogi of Columbia, the subjects of Alan Ereira's remarkable film, From the Heart of the World, have a coherent system of cosmology which relates to the design of their ceremonial houses. The foundation of the Kogi ceremonial houses is accomplished by a Kogi shaman, known as a mama, driving a peg into the ground at the place destined to be its centre. The Kogi ceremonial house has four hearths and is designed to be a microcosmic image of the universe. There are holes in the roof which enable astronomical measurements, closely akin to the house of the Ye'cuanna of Guiana.

For the Kogi the ceremonial house is not the only microcosmic image. So too is the loom. In Kogi belief, the Earth is a vast loom on which the Sun weaves two pieces of cloth a year. The four corners of the square of cloth represent the four Columbian cities at the corners of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Maria, and the crossing point of the two diagonals at the centre represents the holy mountains at the centre. The top and bottom bars of the loom represent the passage of the Sun through the sky at the Solstices.

In Kogi society women rule the houses used for habitation and the domestic arena while the men have an exclusive domain in the public arena, especially the ceremonial house.' This gender division is equally specific in the preparation of textiles. Women spin cotton but do not weave it. Weaving cotton is the men's role, as is its cultivation. Yet, once woven, it is the women who make the bags and clothes. (Ereira 1990; Falvey 1996; Pennick 1988: 114)

The Kogi are survivors of the pre-Conquest culture where textile arts took precedence over gold working. In Peru the highest forms of weaving were made expressly for the sun and were presumably burned in daily sacrifices at Cuzco. Throughout South America textiles predate ceramics and cloth coverings and carrying bags developed into colourful, densely-woven tradition patterns. Fortunately large numbers of elaborate fabrics survive from c.3000 BC to the present, mostly from burials in the coastal sand dunes below the Andes.

These remarkable survivals reveal that virtuoso execution (up to 195 wefts per inch) and expensive raw materials are common. All pieces were fully finished - with no loose threads. With some pieces it is difficult to work out which is 'front' or 'back' and some pieces have exquisite details which are hidden from view when in use. The dyes used

include cochineal - which requires specially bred insects that live only on the nopal cactus. A cupful of insects are sufficient to dye only about one pound of cloth [the Spanish made a second fortune from exporting cochineal as well as the better-known gold 'trade']. The silky fibres from lamas and related species were preferred over cotton - but this required long-term labour to build up herds. The whole of Andean society seems to have been involved in the preparation of the materials needed for textiles. (Stone-Miller 1994: 11-20)

As anyone who has holidayed in the eastern Mediterranean can confirm, for Greek women handwork such as crochet, embroidery and knitting are still given great significance. Parallel examples can be seen among cultures as diverse as the Muslim Middle East and Mongolia; closer to home both nuns and girls at boarding schools in England live(d) according to a schedule with no unorganised time. The Brontë sisters, in common with many other girls of their era, were kept for hours and hours at their sewing, with any thoughts of a rest perhaps countered by the admonishment 'The Devil makes work for idle hands'.

Although on the surface this may be seen as involving the girls and women in skilled, status-enhancing activities, as an aside it may be worth noting that, in the opinion of Ardener

(1993: 5), such time-consuming tasks are a manifestation of male domination and 'are designed to pre-empt the possibility of the women being engaged in freely expressed sexual behaviour'.

Weaving, wyrd and celestial spinning

There is no direct evidence that Old World societies were quite as obsessed with ornate weaving. However, there is a different way in which the deities and the forces of destiny are linked to weaving in European myths. Predictably enough, in most ancient mythologies spinning and weaving are associated with women and with female deities - for instance Arachne, the Greek spider goddess, is said to have spun the world. Also consider the Greek Fates, the three females who were believed to spin destinies. In the north European traditions, wyrd (usually translated as 'destiny') was also woven. In the Old English poem, *Beowulf*, we are told 'The web of their fate would be woven with victories'. Few will need prompting that the three Weird Sisters who prophesied in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are a more recent manifestation of the same sensibility.

'Freyja's distaff' is the name given in the Norse traditions to the three stars we know better as the Belt of Orion; they can also be seen as the Three Norns (or Fates) spinning an individual's wyrd. It is not irrelevant that the Norns were said to live underneath Yggdrasil - only at the centre of the turning world could the moves of Fate be powerless. Elsewhere, 'The whirligig of Time brings in his revenges', as Shakespeare alluded to the forces of destiny.

At the same time 'the celestial axis is inevitably associated with spinning'. (Stone 1992: 11) Cosmological symbolism is implicit in another dimension as spinning thread

brings about a close link between time and amount of material produced. (Pennick 1990: 29-30)

Fate-spinning, peace-weaving, even string-and-finger games (which may have links to Celtic and Anglo-Saxon decorative knotwork in more permanent media of metal and stone) appear to be part of a now-lost symbolism linking weaving and threads. Maybe the women knitting at the foot of guillotines in the French Revolution were less making the most of their time than unselfconsciously continuing a tradition.

In the popular literature, much has been made of the reports that 'shamanic flight' follows straight threads and the counter suggestion that knotted threads - a well-known inclusion in 'witch bottles' - could trap a person's soul as they wandering in their sleep.

Spinning tales

'Spin me a yarn' translates in many languages as an invitation to tell a story.

In Germany, Austria and Switzerland a group of minor goddesses were associated with both the plough and the spinning-wheel. They bore names such as Holde, Frau Holle, Perht, Berta, Frau Gode and St Lucia. Holde and Perht were most closely associated with spinning. Their legends were told and retold in the rooms where the women and girls worked. These goddesses approved of good spinners, but punished those who were lazy and slovenly. 'They were also angered if anyone worked at her wheel at forbidden times, such as the days between Christmas Eve and Twelfth Night, or on Saturday evening, Sunday or the evenings of various festivals, while spinning at night was also prohibited.' (Davidson 1991: 115)

European folklore remained rich with tales in which spinning itself was the main motif. Retelling the tale of Rumpelstiltskin must have made

life more bearable in many a weaving room.

Sleeping Beauty is still one of the best-known 'fairy tales'. Perhaps few are aware that the tale originated in the Greek myth of Hera and Zeus's wedding feast, to which one of the goddesses was not invited. Significantly, the lives of the princess and the whole court are suspended at the moment when she pricks her finger on the spindle of the woman spinning in the top of the tower. Few may have considered that the tale also incorporates significant cosmological and mythological tenets. According to Baring and Cashford (1991: 559-60) 'The lunar symbolism of the tale is evocative of older meanings: the princess is fifteen when she pricks her finger, the first day of the waning moon, when the spinning goddess of the moon begins to loosen the threads of the cloth she has woven. The Wicked Fairy, as the one not invited, is the rejected goddess of the dark moon, whose lore must be included in a total image of the web of life.'

Loom weights, spindle whorls and distaffs

In the Temple Palace at Arkhanes, Crete, semi-precious loom weights were found which indicate that the priestesses themselves may have woven certain sacred garments, perhaps those used to adorn statues of the goddesses or priestess who took the part of the goddess in rituals.

On a more domestic scale the sense of rotating about a centre could be seen by almost every woman as she sat spinning yarn with her spindle. Although these were usually made of mundane materials, usually wood, a small number of Anglo-Saxon burials include spindle whorls made from quartz (rock crystal) cut into facets (Meaney 1981). The effort required to shape and polish the quartz must have been substantial. Apart from

Rumpelstiltskin

Retold by Thorskegga Thorn

Once upon a time there was a miller who had a beautiful daughter. He was a terrible chatterbox and liked nothing more than to praise his daughter. One day he chanced to speak to the King and started his usual banter. 'My daughter is so clever,' said the miller 'that she can spin straw into gold.' The King was greedy for money and demanded that the remarkable young lady should be brought to the palace the next morning. The miller was rather concerned about the outcome of his foolish boast but took his daughter to the palace as requested.

The King did not give the girl a second glance but lead her to a room filled with straw, a spinning wheel, a stool and a pile of bobbins stood in one corner. The King commanded the girl to spin all the straw into gold that very day or face serious punishment. The girl begged and pleaded with the King but he would not listen, she was locked in the room with her impossible task.

The girl began to weep and after a while a manikin dressed all in black crept into the room. He asked her why she was crying and reluctantly she told her story. 'What would you give me if I did your work?' the manikin asked. 'My necklace,' the girl replied and without another word the manikin gathered some straw and sat down at the spinning wheel. He spun very quickly and the wheel turned unnaturally fast, within moments the first bobbin was full. The manikin carried on spinning faster and faster until all the straw was spun and the bobbins shone with gold thread.

When the King returned that evening he was most impressed at the work that had been done. The miller's daughter was made to spend the night in the palace and in the morning she was taken to a larger room full of straw, a spinning wheel and a larger pile of bobbins. The girl sat down and began to weep but again the strange black manikin appeared. This time she offered a ring for his help and without further ado he sat down to spin. The King was well pleased when he returned that evening and seemed to show more interest in the miller's daughter. She was after all very attractive. The girl begged to be set free but again she was forced to spend the night in the palace. In the morning the King led her to a still larger room full of straw and promised that if she could complete the spinning by nightfall, she would become his queen.

As soon as the King left the black manikin appeared and asked what the girl would give him in return for his aid. The girl had nothing left to give and the manikin became thoughtful. 'If you become Queen,' he said 'would you give me your first born child?'. The girl was greatly alarmed by his suggestion but she could see no other option and agreed. The manikin sat down to spin and soon all the straw had been spun into bobbins of shining gold. When the King returned he was overjoyed and he married the miller's daughter the next day.

The girl adapted quickly to her life as a queen and soon forgot her promise to the black manikin. However, months later

when her son was born the manikin appeared and demanded his reward. The Queen became desperate and offered the manikin great riches which he refused. The Queen began to cry and finally the manikin relented. He told her that if she could guess his name in three days she could keep the child. He left promising to return the next evening to hear her first guess. That first night the Queen tried many names until the manikin lost his patience. The Queen was very worried by her failure and sent messengers out to far off lands to collect more ideas. However their finds were to no avail and again the manikin left triumphant. On the third day, one of the messengers returned with a strange tale. He had travelled far and seen a small house in front of which a tiny man was dancing. He had heard the following song:

Today I brew, tomorrow I
bake, The next day I the
Queen's child take. Little
does she guess, poor dame,
That Rumpelstiltskin is my
name!

The Queen was greatly relieved to hear these words and that evening she tackled her task with more confidence. She tried several common names and the manikin smiled broadly. However when she finally uttered the name 'Rumpelstiltskin' the manikin went into a screaming fit. 'The Devil told you!' he shouted and stamped his foot so hard that he disappeared through the floor, and the Queen was never troubled by the manikin again.



Top left: An eighteenth century wooden biscuit mould from East Frisian. Such biscuits were made at Yuletide. This example shows the goddess Freya or Bertha, depicted wearing lunar horns and holding a distaff and spindle. (After Pennick 1990: 40)

Top right: A fourteenth century misericord from Worcester Cathedral showing a woman spinning with a distaff and spindle. (Drawing by Thorskegga Thorn.)



giving prestige to the user perhaps the intention was to refract the light of, say the fire, thereby making a tedious task more interesting.

In the Roman Empire it seems that spindle whorls were gifts, presumably given on betrothal or marriage. Some of the Latin inscriptions are relatively genial and translate as 'Pretty girl give beer' or 'Pretty girl, what do you want?' - although there are many more obscene variants (Enright 1996 p265-6).

On the occasion of the presentation of an ivory distaff to the bride of his friend Nician, the poet Theocritus wrote these lines:

O distaff, friend to warp and
woof,
Minerva's gift in man's behoof,
Whom careful housewives will
retain,
And gather to their household's
gain,
With me repair - no vulgar prize.
Where the famed towers of
Nileus rise;
Thither, would Jove kind
breezes send,
I steer my course to meet my
friend.
The ivory distaff I provide,
A present for his blooming
bride.
With her thou wilt sweet toil
partake,
And her various vests to make.

(Cited in Thorn 1995: 33)

Below: Thirteenth century floor tile depicting the wand as a symbol of kingly power. (After a reconstruction by M. Shurlock).

While these days witches tend to be associated with broomsticks, until comparatively recently there were equally strong associations with distaffs. The Scandinavian goddess Freya is commonly associated with the distaff (see Thorn 1996 for a detailed discussion). As late as the eighteenth century a biscuit mould depicts the goddess Freya or Bertha with a distaff.

Family historians still refer to the female ancestors as 'the distaff side' and Howard (1996: 8) has suggested that this reflects the ancient tradition of matrilineal descent important in witch families. A related issue is surnames which, of course, are



passed down the male descendants. While Webster exists as a surname 'Spinner' does not. Indeed, spinster, an Old English term for all women, remains in modern English although with a narrower meaning i.e. unmarried woman of mature years.

Staffs and sceptres

Regarded as symbolic objects, distaffs are exceptionally close to staffs and sceptres. Rosmerta, the north European goddess of fertility and fate (often linked to the Roman goddess Fortuna) is usually depicted with a staff, rod or 'sceptre'. Germanic sybils or prophetesses of the same era were also depicted with similar staffs. (Enright 1996: 244-6).

While some women may carry staffs or sceptres, men do not carry distaffs. Indeed, sceptres came to be (and still are) primarily emblems of kingship, while staffs remained important for the common man. No pilgrim was complete with a sturdy staff of a design which would be favourable for serious rambles today, while walking sticks, canes and their like have long been fashion accoutrements as much as mobility aids.

A domestic omphalos

Whereas the sceptre is seen only as a symbolic object,

spindle whorls and distaffs (except when made of expensive materials) are rarely seen as anything but mundane artifacts. However, I hope these brief remarks suggest that perhaps we should, instead, consider that these ubiquitous tools were regarded by their owners as related to the axis mundi and the spinning of Fate. Indeed they are the most portable and domestic of all the images of the omphalos.

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Spinning in Myths & Folktales

THORSKEGGA THORN researches Teutonic mythology, goddess cults and textile history. She is currently co-editing Thunder a journal covering the cult of the North European thundergods. Much of her work derives from practical research for historical re-enactment and she has toiled long with both spindle and spinning wheel.

The folk heritage of spinning has been ignored, misrepresented and misunderstood by historians and folklorists alike. This is a terrible shame as spinning was hailed as the most worthy of a woman's tasks up until the Industrial Revolution. The craft has been lost in obscurity and has no apparent relevance to the modern world. Maybe as a pagan social historian and spinner I can bring this noble craft back into the light.

Spinning is the art of transforming loose fibres such as wool and flax into thread. This is done by pulling out the fibres to the required width and introducing twist to fix and strengthen them. The ancient tools of the spinner were the distaff and the spindle. The distaff was a long staff to which the fibres were tied to keep them untangled. The spindle was a short shaft weighted with a stone whorl which was used like a suspended spinning top to provide momentum and the downward pull of gravity for the work. These same implements were the spinner's only tools until the late fourteenth century when early spinning wheels were developed. Because first wheels were large, inefficient, expensive and unpopular the spindle remained in common use until the eighteenth century.

Foremost among the mythological spinners is the ancient German goddess Holda whose cult has persevered through fifteen centuries of Christianity. She is given many roles, control of the weather, giver of fertility,

protector of unborn children, but foremost she is the patron of spinners. She travels through the land checking on spinners' handiwork, the industrious are rewarded and the idle punished. The most interesting account of Holda was collected by the brothers Grimm, the fairy tale 'Frau Holda'.

A mother had two daughters, the eldest was spoilt and idle, the youngest unloved and overworked. The youngest daughter sat outside the cottage and span by the well every day. On one occasion she cut her hand on the point of the spindle. She dipped it into the well to wash it but the spindle fell from her hand and sank out of sight. Knowing her punishment for losing her mother's spindle would be severe the girl leapt into the well to end her miserable life. Instead of oblivion she finds herself in the land of Holda where she stays as Holda's housemaid for several weeks. Holda is impressed by the girl's kindness and industry and

sends her back to her family loaded with gold. The girl's mother sends the eldest daughter to get more gold from Holda. Copying her sister she bloodies a spindle and leaps into the well. The eldest daughter cannot hide her true nature for long and Holda is exasperated by her idleness. Eventually Holda sends her home covered in soot.

Holda is the spinner's patron who teaches, encourages, inspires and rewards the hard working. Her teaching role is seen most clearly in a German folk tale where she shows a poor farmer's wife how to make linen cloth from the flax plant and sets up the family in prosperity.

However in Grimm's tale of Frau Holda the spindle becomes more than just a tool, it is the magic link between the world of men and Holda's land. The requirement for the girls to wet the spindle with blood and leap into the well suggests an ancient shamanistic ritual for contacting the goddess, requiring blood offerings applied to the goddess's symbol followed by a trance giving the sensation of falling. Water is often linked to Holda, she has a sacred pool where she cares for the spirits of unborn children and women come to bathe to increase fertility. Another folk story tells of an hard working woman who spun on Twelfth Night, a day sacred to the spinning goddess and set aside from work. Perchtha (a regional variant of Holda) peered into the window

and passed the woman two bobbins demanding that they should be filled within the hour. The woman spun as much as she could on the bobbins and threw them into the brook running past the house. Again the contact of spindle and water is believed to be the link to the goddess.

The goddess as a patron of spinners is known from many mythologies. The Egyptians held that Isis first taught women to spin while the Greeks attributed the textile crafts to Artemis and Athene. Among the Baltic peoples it is the sun goddess Saule who spins as she traverses the heavens, sunbeams being the fruit of her labours. An identical role is given to the Japanese sun goddess Amaterasu who works in her weaving room in the sky. The Norse goddess Frigg is a spinner and in Scandinavia the star constellation Orion's Girdle is named 'Friggjar rockr', Frigg's distaff. The heavenly distaff is also claimed by Freyja and the Virgin Mary. The Norwegian belief that spun yarn should not be cut on a Friday (Frigg's day) may be a memory of Frigg's worship. Note the similarity of this superstition and the dangers of spinning on holy days in Holda's territory.

All these goddesses hold very important positions in their regional hierarchies, attesting to the great importance of spinning to our female ancestors. By compassion the arts of cooking and laundering are poorly covered in folklore. By her spinning and weaving a woman showed her skills to the rest of the community through the quality of her family's clothes and to her guests by her wall hangings and table linen. Young women produced heavily decorated household fabrics to increase their value as brides, hence the use of the word 'spinster' for an unmarried woman. Again and again folk tales stress the importance of choosing industrious rather than beautiful wives, not to mention the heights to which a hard working girl could soar. In the

story 'Tom Tit Tot' a king is eager to marry a poor woman's daughter when he hears that she is proficient at spinning. Likewise the heroine of the German tale 'Rumpelstiltskin' is brought out of obscurity when her father boasts of her skill. Thus the good spinner was the embodiment of the perfect housewife.

The woman who cannot spin is ridiculed and worthless. The spoilt princess from 'King Prickly Beard' is dragged to a peasants hovel and forced to spin, her hands are so unused to work that the thread makes them bleed. In the Scottish tale 'Whipperty Stourie' a husband is so disgusted by his wife's inability to spin that he threatens to divorce her.

A common theme of spinning tales is the breaking of magical boundaries. Spinning women attract all kinds of supernatural creatures and spirits. The tale of Frau Holda is a prime example where the act of spinning causes a link between worlds. Rumpelstiltskin and his English equivalent Tom Tit Tot appear at the spinners side to offer miraculous help at tragic cost. The German queen must lose her first child and the English lady must become bride to a goblin. Both escape their fate by a lucky chance.

Other hostile spirits include the mischievous fairies from the Scottish tale 'The Good Housewife and her Night Helpers'. The housewife worked late at her spinning while her family slept. Eager to complete her weaving she made a wish that someone would come from land or sea, far or near to help her finish the work. This unwise request summoned a large number of fairies who took up the woman's carding, spinning and weaving. The fairies kept crying out to the housewife for food until the larder was empty and the poor woman was half demented. She tried to wake her family but they were all deep in an enchanted sleep. Terrified she ran from the house and consulted the village elder who helped her extract

the fairies by trickery.

A similar story is told in Ireland in which a spinning housewife, working late, was visited by ten witch women. Each of them had horns growing out of their foreheads and carried wool combs, a reel or a spinning wheel. They all sat down in the house and began to work at the wool with lightning speed. Again the housewife was driven to distraction by their demands for food and ran from the house to fetch water for baking. She was helped by a kindly spirit living in the well and the witches were expelled, again by trickery.

A Russian folk story tells of a cruel peasant woman who cut off a bear's leg while he was sleeping. She took the leg home, cut off the fur, laid the skin aside for curing and put the meat in a pot over the fire. When she gathered the fur onto her distaff and tried to spin it the thread broke continuously, while over the fire the meat refused to cook. The woman became increasingly uneasy and late in the night she heard a growling voice outside. The bear entered her house, growling a song about the harm she had done him and bit off the woman's head.

Not all spirits drawn to the spinner are harmful. Holda, although harsh on the idle and defensive of holy days is essentially benevolent. The heroine from 'Whipperty Stourie', in disgrace for her inability to spin, met six fairies spinning in a hidden chamber beneath a large stone. All of them had hideously deformed lips 'bent like a fir tree in the wind'. The fairies asked her why she was so sad and the woman explained her predicament. The woman was told not to worry but to go home and tell her husband that she had six guests for dinner. She did just so and when the table was set the six fairies arrived. The husband was curious about their appearance and eventually asked them why their lips were bent. The fairies replied that they span every

day, and wetting the flax in their mouths so often had caused the deformity. The husband was horrified, imagining his beautiful wife with the same features and declared that he would never ask her to spin again.

The story of 'Lazy Gerda' is similar. Gerda was the original idle brat and her mother happened to be screaming at her to help with the spinning when the queen rode by. The queen demanded to know the reason for the commotion. Gerda's mother was deeply embarrassed and lied that her daughter had spun all her flax and she had to buy more. The queen was very impressed by this apparently hardworking young girl and decided to procure her as a bride for the prince. Gerda was whisked off to the royal palace where she was given a spinning wheel and three rooms filled to the ceiling with flax which she had to spin. Gerda was terrified, she had never spun a thread in her life and did not know how to start. When the child burst into tears three women appeared, one with a huge lip, one with a huge thumb and one with a huge foot. The fairy women span all the flax and invited themselves to dinner. The prince asked them why they were so deformed. They explained that they bore the marks of long years of spinning and the prince declared that no wife of his would ever touch a spinning wheel.

A Latvian tale, 'The She-Lynx' follows the common theme of the unloved step-daughter. However, this time a magical cow appears to aid the spinster. She feeds her flax to the cow and spun yarn pours out of its nose and winds into skeins on its horns. The stepmother discovers the secret and has the cow slaughtered. From the cow's body springs a golden apple tree and a spring of wine which only the stepdaughter can approach. A king happens to pass by and asks for a drink from the spring and one of the apples. Deeply impressed by the stepdaughter's good looks and kindness he offers her marriage.



Illustration by Thorskegga Thorn.

Another aspect of magical spinning is the spindle's use as the tool of fate. The parcae of classical mythology spin woollen yarn which is measured and cut for each life span. This idea is elaborated in Lithuanian myths where seven goddesses share the work. The high god gives a distaff to the first goddess who spins the thread of life, the second takes the thread and warps a loom, and the third weaves. The fourth goddess tells stories to interrupt the work and the fifth encourages their industry. The sixth goddess cuts the fabric from the loom and the

seventh washes the garment which becomes a winding sheet and passes it to the high god. This is a different scenario where the length of each man's life is left to chance rather than the conscious decision of the goddesses. In Norse mythology the Norns and Valkyries work threads representing life. A wonderful description is given in 'The Lay of Helgi' from the Poetic Edda. At the birth of the hero the Norns span a magical thread and attached it to the heavens, one end was placed in the west and one in the east marking the land that Helgi would control in maturity.

A far more familiar story based on the idea of the fates is 'Sleeping Beauty' written by Charles Perrault. Perrault must have based his tale on much older material because the blessings given by the fairies corresponds closely to stories about the Norns surviving in Scandinavian folklore. The old fairy even places her curse by means of the ancient symbol of fate, the drop spindle.

Thus in the hands of the fates the spindle becomes a weapon of magic. The Teutons attributed almost all magical powers to women and there may well be a connection between the spindle as a symbol of womanhood and its use for enchantment. Of the Norse goddesses it is Frigg (who knows the fate of men) and Freyja (the teacher of magic) who are the spinners' patrons. The whirling spindle would have been an awesome sight in a time when hardly any task was automated and, unsurprisingly, was considered to harbour magical powers. In the stories 'Frau Holda' and 'Sleeping Beauty' the spindle comes across as a magical rather than a mundane object. In both cases it is stained with blood to start the enchantment.

Another story which gives the spindle a magical role is 'The Spindle, the Shuttle and The

Needle' recorded by the brothers Grimm. A young girl lived alone in a small cottage. Her mother had died when she was young leaving her a spindle, a shuttle, a needle and her blessing. The girl was hard working and spun wove and sewed every day to earn her food, singing songs that her mother had taught her. One day a prince came past searching for his perfect bride, he peered into the girl's cottage and passed on. The girl was cheered by the brief appearance of the handsome stranger and burst into song 'Spindle, oh spindle, hasten away, and bring to my house the suitor I pray.' At her words the spindle leapt out of her hands and danced off in the prince's wake leaving the shining thread trailing behind. The prince was amazed when the spindle overtook him and twirled in front of his horse. He decided to follow the thread back and when he arrived at the girl's cottage the shuttle and needle had woven rich curtains and rugs. The prince decided he had found his bride.

The magical spindle is also encountered in the Russian tale 'Finist the White Falcon'. A young girl is travelling far across the world looking for her lover. She meets three old women who give her magical gifts to

help her in her search. One of these is a distaff and spindle which spins flax into gold. The girl gives the spindle to her lover's wife in return for a moment alone with him in his bedchamber. Her lover divorces his wife for valuing the gift over her fidelity and marries the heroine.

The spindle comes across strongly as a symbol of womanhood (of a straight-laced, hearth-tied, skirt-bundled variety, from an age when both sexes worked themselves to exhaustion in the daily round). But even in her subservience a woman held power and the distaff was her weapon against the world of men. In the domestic battle the mediaeval woman reached for her distaff, a far more versatile weapon than today's rolling pins due to its length.

Femininity and spinning have come hand in hand through the centuries. The Anglo-Saxons called their women 'peace weavers'. We still use the terms 'distaff side' and 'spinster' their original relevance forgotten. Representing her sex the image of Eve spinning after the fall from grace to clothe her nakedness graces many a church and prayer book. The ancient Greek comedy of *Hercules and Omphale* relies on the femininity of spinning when the demi-god is humiliated by being dressed in skirts and forced to spin. In Grimms' tale of 'The Twelve Huntsmen' a king tries to determine the sex of some cross-dressed women by leading them through a room filled with spinning wheels, which only a woman would admire.

The spindle is the symbol of the female sex and consequently the symbol of leading goddesses from across the world. The use of the spindle by the fates of classical literature and the importance of female magic in the Germanic tradition have enforced the connection between spinning and the supernatural.

❖ THUNDER ❖

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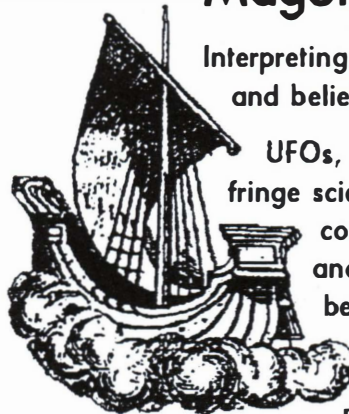
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Pussycat, Pussycat, Where have you been?

JEREMY HARTE needs no introduction to regular readers of At the Edge. New readers may be interested to know that he is Curator of the Bourne Hall Museum in Ewell.

It was a dark and stormy night. A man was running home through the rain; he threw himself through the door of the house and slammed it behind him. His wife jumped up, surprised, and even their old tom cat looked up curiously from beside the fire. Asked what was wrong, the man came out with a queer story. As he had been walking along the lonely wet road homewards, he came across a long line of cats, like a procession – and as he said this, their own cat paced towards him. This procession seemed to be a funeral, since there were four cats at the front carrying a coffin draped in black – and here their own cat fixed his deep green eyes, fascinated, on the speaker. On top of the coffin there was a little cushion, and on that cushion a crown . . . and at this, their own cat swelled up to twice his size and hissed out the words ‘So! Old Tom’s dead and I’m *King of the Cats!*’ And he turned round and bolted up the chimney before either of them could stop him (Jacobs 1894:156; Briggs 1970:B1.294).

‘It’s nature breaks through the eyes of a cat’, say the Irish. ‘Someways they would put a dread on you. What company do they keep? When the moon is riding high and the wind tearing the trees, and the shadows black with cold, who is it calls them from the hearth? Tell me that’(Glasse 1985: 178). Cats pass unchanged from the cold, wet wild into the home, and at a time of their own choosing go out again. There is no other animal, wild or tame, that behaves like this, which is why motif B342 is always told as *King of the Cats*. It is a simple enough drama, with three actors, and a parallelism of plot. First the man speaks, and the cat is surprised: then the cat speaks, and the humans are surprised. The man goes in from the lonely road to the warm hearthside; then the cat goes out from the house to

the wild. And the wife sits by the fire, listening to them both, passive and domestic.

But what of women who did not stay at home? Might they not, like cats, slip out unseen at night to meet strange company in the woods and fields? Lady Sybil of Bernshaw Tower certainly did. She was a woman of independent spirit; she rejected all advances from men, but the Devil made her a better offer and she sold her soul to him. After that she spent her days wandering among the crags and cliffs that rise beyond Burnley, and her nights dancing with the Lancashire witches. Lord William of Hapton Tower was the most persistent of her suitors, and at length his moment came, for he came across Sybil when she was in the form of a doe and he hunted her down with his dogs

until she was compelled to change back to human form and agree to be his bride. The marriage was not a success. Within the year Lady Sybil was out again at nights, this time in the form of a white cat. She and her unholy sisters enjoyed themselves hugely spoiling all the corn of the neighbourhood, but when they were at Cliviger Mill they kicked up such a racket that the miller’s boy woke up, stumbled into the building knife in hand, and hacked away at the fleeing animals. Next morning Lady Sybil lay indisposed in bed, her right arm thrust firmly under the bedclothes, but the miller’s boy was angrily knocking at her husband’s door, and in his bag he carried a lady’s severed hand (Harland & Wilkinson 1873: 5–7).

Witch cats are not uncommon, and they usually meet their end through a transferred blow of this sort (Baughman 1966: motif G275.12). On the Island of Purbeck, in my native Dorset, the old road used to pass through a toll gate just outside Ulwell, and a cottage beside the road was home to the witch, Jinny Gould. She used to sit out on the gate at nights in the form of a cat, getting a lot of fun out of terrifying travellers, until one drunken carter picked up enough daring to land her a blow across the back with his whip. Suddenly the cat vanished, and back in the cottage Jinny lay dead (Luckham 1906). Today both the tollgate and the cottage are



gone, although haunted gates survive elsewhere in the county. Normally it is ghosts which sit on these liminal markers, not witches, although a cat-witch is reported from a farm gate in Cheshire (Briggs 1970: B2.628). A Dorset witch is much more likely to take the form of a hare. One of these animals used to linger around the hills near Ulwell, teasing hunters by running in and out of range, but never getting hurt. Nobody had the cunning to load their gun with a silver sixpence, which is what men ought to carry when they suspect they are dealing with a quarry which is not right. By this means the resident witch of Worth Matravers was crippled in the leg, and another, waiting by a stile for the hunters to go home, was lamed by the silver gunshot and then ripped up with a sickle (Knott 1963: 19; Udall 1922: 207, 330).

Witch hares

Hunters in those days were interested in anything they could sneak home for the pot. A malicious witch could have changed herself into all sorts of different creatures to deceive them, but the stories are always about a witch-hare – which is odd. But then, hares are an odd sort of creatures altogether. I was once out walking in Purbeck, crossing the downs above Lulworth, when a jack hare came lolling down the

farm track towards me, staring at me. In the moment before he darted off into the stubble I had the queer feeling that it was the hare who had right of way, and it was I who should have turned aside. The other creatures which one disturbs when out walking always fly away or scuttle into the bushes, but when an animal stops and looks at you, it is uncanny. At any rate, I am not the only person to feel this. In the thirteenth-century charm, 'The Names of the Hare', he is *the brodlokere* and *the make-agrise* – the starrer, the one who makes you afraid: and he has seventy-five other names, too (Evans & Thomson 1972: 202–5). George Gifford captures the same feeling, although he is writing sarcastically, at the beginning of his *Dialogue On Witches*. The believer in witches confesses, 'In good sooth, I may tell it to you as to my friend, when I go but into my closes I am afraid, for I see now and then a hare, which by my conscience giveth me is a witch or some witch's spirit, she stareth so upon me. And...there is a foule great cat sometimes in my barne which I have no liking unto' (Gifford 1931). Both these animals seem to be singled out as humans-in-disguise because they are usurping the human right to stare. Mowgli stared at the wolves, and they could not return his gaze; this is the magisterial gaze, which carries

with it a right of dominion (Baker 1993: 158). People in authority look unflinchingly at their subordinates, who must not stare back at them – but the cat is a heretic to this system of belief, because a cat can look at a king. It is refreshing to find that neither Hitler nor Ceaucescu were fond of cats. Stalin didn't like them much, either.

Talking hares

In the army, where all the outward forms of power have to be carefully conserved, this business of staring back is forbidden. Queens Rules make it a punishable offence, under the name of Dumb Insolence. Naturally one expects the insolence of animals to be dumb anyway, but in the stories they do sometimes get to speak. In Co. Roscommon a man went to shoot a hare, but it turned to look at him and said 'You wouldn't shoot your old grandfather now, would you?'. John Page of Clooncondra saw another hare jump up on an old wall, and followed it for a mile, waiting for the moment that a brown face would peer out from under the ivy so that he could bang at it with a stick. But when it did appear, the hare told him to mind his own business and then (as he seemed to be a little shaken by this) advised him to go home and pour himself a drink (Evans and Thomson 1972: 97, 159, 177). One of our Dorset hares was in the habit of jeering 'Huntsman, shoot better!' every time a shot whistled past her head, until one moonlit night a sportsman loaded up with a silver penny and so reduced her to silence (Udall 1922: 330).

Dumb women

As this last example might suggest, it is not only animals which are supposed to be dumb. When witch-hares enter the story, the talking beast is not just a beast, but stands metonymically [see overleaf] for the talking woman. (Le Guin



1987: 10–13) How to silence them, one way or another, tested the ingenuity of many men in old Dorset. As you leave Purbeck, taking the Wareham road out of Corfe, you can stop at a pub called the Quiet Woman. The name is wordlessly explained by the sign – she is only quiet because she has no head at all. It is a drastic way of solving domestic problems, but it must have caught on, as there are seven or eight pubs with the same sign up and down the country (Larwood & Hotten 1951 [1866]: 267). At Halstock near Sherborne the sign is reinterpreted by locals, who say

that it commemorates the beheaded martyr St Juthware. This does not alter the underlying meaning so much as extend it, since the beheading of women, whether saints or sinners, is a way of requiring faceless submission from them (Doniger 1995). Many a generation of Dorset men must have waxed loquacious in the snugger over this one, but closing time comes, and they had to stumble home to the accusing stare and restless tongues of their wives. 'Let the women learn in silence with all subjection', said St Paul hopefully (Timothy 2:11), a text which was much quoted in the

days of the Puritans, but not always with the desired effect. 'Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft' (1 Sam:15:23) was another: it was painted above the chancel arch of Marnhull church, without having much influence on Fanny Coombs who roamed the Common at night in the form of a hare (Marnhull Womens Institute 1940: 30). Control seemed very necessary, for who was to know what women might say once they took it into their heads to talk? The legislation passed against their loose speech in 1624 included not only swearing, but spells (Warner 1990: 12). There is also a healthy fear of gossip in misogynist literature, as the realisation dawns that women, being privy to the secrets of the home, might be able to let on about a number of rather embarrassing things. As, indeed, might animals. Tobermory, the cat in Saki's short story, causes general consternation when he acquires the ability to speak about what he has seen and heard, and a bowl of poisoned fish is rapidly prepared (Saki 1930: 119).

A coven of cats, crows and hares

By speaking, animals cease to be subordinate. 'He's probably in the local newspaper office at the present moment, dictating the first instalment of his reminiscences', someone says of Tobermory, and the tomcat in the story with which we began speaks only when he is revealed as a king. Looking at it the other way round, when women are rebellious, they count as witches, and witches practice their insubordination in animal form. The indictment against Bessie Thorn of Aberdeen specified that 'accompanied with thy devilish companions and faction, transformed in other likeness, some in hares, some in cats, and some in other similitudes, ye all danced about the Fish Cross', and at Auldearn, Isobel



'Mummy, what's the difference between a *metaphor* and a *metonym*?'

'Well, Susie, a metaphor cannot be literally true . . .'

'Like, when you describe Daddy as a "tower of strength"?'

'Yes, indeed. Whereas a *metonym* takes an attribute or adjunct of the thing instead of the thing itself. So, one can say 'The Crown' when referring to the Queen, or 'The turf' when meaning horse-racing.'

'And,' interjected John, 'there is also *synecdoche*. That means naming the part for the whole, like just saying "keels" for "ships".'

synecdoche

metaphor

metonym

Fifty keels ploughed the deeps . . .

Gowdie confessed to rampaging through the countryside with the rest of the coven in the form of cats, crows and hares; they ate, drank and wasted their neighbours' goods in an orgy of spite (Davidson 1949: 66–67). Isobel offers two similar charms, one for turning yourself into a hare, the other for transformation into a cat, so she must have regarded the two animals as homologous. Most people felt that way. In 'The Names of the Hare', Wat is called *wodecat*, *bromkat*, and *fursecat* – he is the cat of the woods, the broom and the furze, as in Welsh idiom (Evans & Thomson 1972), while Puss by contrast is the cat of the household. But even Puss – a name adopted from the Germanic languages as a convenient sort of sound to call cats with – soon acquired a secondary meaning of 'hare' in English usage (*OED* s.v.).

Dog is to cat as man is to woman

Looking at it from the point of view of superstitious men, there have to be limits. You cannot go about your business in the fields trembling in case almost any wild animal is your neighbour in disguise. But although it makes sense to limit the possible witch creatures to one or two species, there must be a reason behind the particular species which are chosen. No witch, for instance, ever transforms herself into a dog. Not that there is anything sacrosanct about dogs. They appear as familiars; the Devil himself had no compunctions about presiding over the Sabbath in the form of a mickle black tyke. But the rules of gender still hold good in those abandoned revels where every other rule is broken. Women cannot become dogs, for dog is to cat as man is to woman, and as Devil is to witch. Come to that, there are never any witch vixens, even though foxes – like cats, which they resemble in so many other ways – have that



unnerving habit of giving you a cool stare when they feel they can safely do so. The uncanny fox of tales and balladry always turns out to be the Devil (Briggs 1970: B1.47; Baughman 1966: motif G303.3.3.2.2). By contrast, cats can function as vehicles for transformation, for transgressing the critical boundary between people and animals, because they are already breaking limits of another kind. Passing indifferently between two worlds, the cat appears at one moment settled by the comfortable fireside, at another walking in the wild woods, as Kipling says, on its wild lone.

Liminal weasels

To serve as a vehicle of transformation, an animal has to be a borderline case – half-trusted, half-feared. The contrast between our Dorset witches and those of classical antiquity bears this out. The ancients never really took to cats, and in order to keep the house clear of mice they relied on other creatures – sacred snakes, and weasels. Passing in and out of the house through cracks in walls and doors, these were liminal animals. And Thelyphron in *The Golden Ass* tells how he lay awake near midnight in a house threatened by *strygae* or witches, 'beginning to feel thoroughly frightened when all of a sudden a weasel squeezed in through a hole in the door, stopped close by me and fixed her eyes intently on mine. The boldness of the creature was most

disconcerting . . .' (Apuleius 1950: 66). It is, of course, a transformed witch. So in ancient Greece, weasels provide a way of talking about the fear of witches (and women) because they are semi-domestic, while cats are rare. In England, cats provide the same language because *they* are semi-domestic, while weasels – though common enough – do not count. There are no cat-flaps for weasels, no convention by which they can run in and out between home and the wild.

The witches of Apuleius are sexually voracious. Man-eaters in more senses than one, they go far beyond anything attributed to their English cousins: but although the sex-life of our native witches is passed over in silence, animal transformation offers a speechless interpretation of it. Puss, as we have seen can be both cat and hare, but increasingly from the 18th century she can also be a woman – a flirtatious young woman. It is only a small step from metaphor to euphemism, from the general sense of puss to the specific one of pussy, but this is too simplistic a reading. Small furry animals are not just transferred anatomy, but occur in all sorts of contexts as a reflected commentary on female identity and sexuality. At the most decorous end there is the squirrel carressed by the queen on a thirteenth-century tile design: the more blunt approach is shown in the mouse taken for a walk on a leash (can this really have worked in practice?) by a sixteenth-

Right: Fifteenth-century allegorical depiction of Lust by Pisanello. (Uncaptioned illustrations used in this article are from sixteenth and seventeenth-century woodcuts.)

century prostitute advertising her services. (Jones 1991: 198). Cats, right from the first date of their domestication, have belonged to or signified women. Bast was a goddess; in ancient Egyptian art, the cat appears curled up snugly under women's chairs, while master is signified by a brace of hunting dogs (Malek 1993). These images must have been brought, with the breed of cats themselves, to Northern Europe – otherwise why would Freyja's chariot be drawn by cats? (Snorri 1954: 53). Meanwhile, a great deal of innocent fun was being derived from linking imagery of hares and rabbits with the feminine. The rabbit is called a coney (to rhyme with honey), it lives in a hole, and so on. This is an unexpected insight into the hunt of the witch hare, who will after all turn into an old woman as unattractive physically as she is morally, but this is not the only kind of witch. There is, for instance, the lady 'straight as willow wand' in the ballad, who despises her magical competitor, the coal-black smith. 'She turned herself into a hare/ To rin upon yon hill/ And he became a gude greyhound,/ And boldly he did fill' (Child 1904: 78).

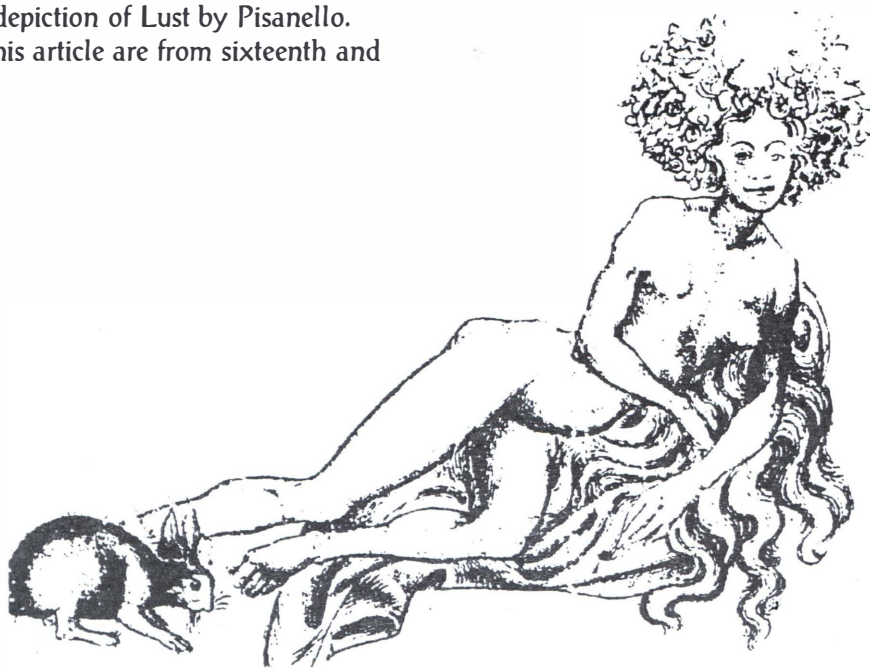
Bonfires of cats

The image of the hare-hunt is used in contexts varying from the seduction of high-born ladies to the lynching of unpopular old women. The one constant factor is the use of violence to define relationships between men and women – part of a style of discourse which constantly links sex with aggression, and particularly with the aggression of hunting (Roscoe 1994: 61–64). The same metaphors come into play when cats are being pursued, only now the romantic image of the hunt is dropped in favour of something much rougher. 'A woman who

enjoys sex is a 'hellcat', a 'wildcat', a 'tiger' – a rapacious beast; all terms applied to violent women as well' (Dolgin 1977: 299) but from the point of view of the unfortunate biological cat, the violence is all one-sided. Under suspicion of being witches, cats were tortured with all the ingenuity men could command. The ritual bonfires lit for the various calendar festivals between Lent and Midsummer were used for this. At Metz cats were enclosed in wicker cages over the flames, in Alsace they were thrown in, and in the Ardennes they were carefully strapped onto the ends of poles and held just above the flames. At Paris the midsummer bonfires consumed whole sacks and barrels of cats. These were the bonfires which Louis XIV was honoured to light in 1648. He wore a crown of roses, and was dressed as if for a dance (Frazer 1923: 38–40). The men who kindled these bonfires were unable to burn the witches who weighed so heavily on their imaginations, but they could round up cats as substitutes, and they explained their pleasure in the screams of the dying animals by interpreting each one as a witch who had been captured during her time of metamorphosis. Even when

the witch belief was gone, the motives for purgative cruelty remained. Still in Paris, but a century later, there was a day during which the apprentices and young men were free to go on the rampage, killing as many cats as they could. Many unspoken meanings lay behind this horrid custom, but among them was the opportunity given to the lads to get their own back on important local women by aiming blows at their pets (Darnton 1985).

There is a social drama implicit in the stories of the cat-witch. Lady Sybil of Bernshaw Tower was nobly born, after all, even if she went slumming with low company at the Sabbath, whereas the lad who brought about her downfall was a miller's servant. It is the same social distance as lies between the white lady and that hero of labour, the rusty, fusty, musty, dusty coal-black smith. At Strasbourg a workman, plodding home after a hard day in the fields, was set upon by three fiend-like cats. He acquitted himself manfully with his axe, and beat them off: but come next morning, he was arrested for molesting three reputable ladies from the town. Quoting the cat experience as his alibi, he asked for the ladies to appear and dispute it, but



they were indisposed – this seemed a suspicious circumstance: so the judges ordered for them to be searched, and the marks of the axe were found on their bodies. In other stories the antithesis is not between classes, but simply between men and women. In Swabia a soldier used to drop in on his girlfriend whenever he could find time – the garrison allowed him nights off sentry duty – but early in the relationship she told him not to try doing this on a Friday. This weighed on his mind, and come one Friday night he set out quietly towards her house. As he entered the street, a white cat slipped out of the shadows and paced behind him. It refused to be driven off, and increasingly frustrated at this betrayal of his plan, the man drew his sword and slashed at it, cutting across a paw; then he carried on uninterrupted to the girl's house. He was told she was in bed, but he would not take no for an answer and ran up the stairs to see her. There she was, under tumbled bedclothes in which a spreading bloodstain could hardly be concealed. Tearing back the coverlet, he found the stump of an arm where his earlier blow had struck home (Howey 1931: 97–99).

Transferred violence

Perhaps because the witch in this story is, for once, an attractive girl and not a hag, symbolic nuances are present in every detail. Her lover strikes at her with his weapon, and she bleeds on the bed-linen; but this bloodstain on the sheets, which acts as proof that she is an impure witch, is exactly the same token which (if everything had gone to plan) could have been produced as evidence that she was a pure bride. Her lover is a soldier, and he is under orders that prevent him from seeing her every night: but the only order which she gives him, the prohibition on Fridays, leads to disaster because he refuses to accept her right to

impose conditions and responds with violence. She passes herself off as something which she is not, twice over – firstly as a village sweetheart when she is really a witch-girl, and then as a white cat when she is really a woman. That will explain why it is the animal's paw which is cut off in this story, as in so many others. The enormity of a transgression of the human/animal boundary is pointed up by the contrast when the paw of the cat (or hare, or wolf, or whatever) is found to have turned into a human hand.

These stories about the transferred blow are a kind of fantasy transposition of actual events. In real life, men find that women are not what they expect them to be (quiet, docile, dependent and so on) and they beat them up. In the reversed mirror of legend, men beat up not-women in the forms of cats and hares, and only after this do they find that they were not what they expected them to be. Either way, we are dealing with a moment of discovery at which a woman can be redefined as a witch, and treated with violence. In the stories, as in real life, the male violence is ritualised – the blows and silver bullets are measured and coercive, not spontaneous responses. And an important part of this ritual involves breaking into the witch's house.

Men have to transgress the boundaries of the witch's house to unmask her. She appeared as an animal outside, but will be revealed as a woman inside: not until this is proved can the conflict come to a resolution. Sometimes – at least in the stories – just seeing is enough. The witch hare of Castle Eden was cursed by a magical greyhound until she ran for home and slipped in through a space cut in the back door, blood dripping from her savaged hindleg. When the hunters caught up, they smashed down the door. Inside they found the woman bandaging her leg – and from that moment her power was broken. End of story (Grice 1944: 99–102). It is interesting

to see how carefully many of these stories define the mode of entrance of the witch hare. In a version from Co. Galway she slips in through a hinged window; in a Caernarvonshire narrative she jumps over the lower half of a stable door; in another from Cardiganshire, she escapes up the chimney (Evans & Thomson 1972: 161, 169, 172). Of course the plot depends on the hare getting into the house by some means or other, but storytellers are making a feature out of her way in. The sense of transgression, of boundaries being crossed, is never absent. It occurs, too, in those stories which describe the invasion of a victim's house by witch animals – the sort of thing which we would nowadays call psychic attack. At Sutton-on-Trent the wife of a weaver was afflicted by a cat which appeared on the stairs and, after running onto her bed and clawing her, escaped through an attic window. The weaver lay in wait and struck at it with a toasting fork: after that, a local witch went around for a few weeks with her face bandaged, and the trouble was over (Addy 1895: 44). Similar accounts were being made in the era of the witch trials. 'The Night following, as he lay in his Bed, there came in at the Window, the likeness of a Cat, which flew upon him, took fast hold of his Throat, lay on him a considerable while, and almost killed him' (Mather 1862 [1693]: 142).

Witch stones and horseshoes

Wherever the boundaries of a house can be breached, there is a danger that witches may come in. Doors, windows, chimneys and holes in the roof are all suspect. This identification of the danger makes sense of the locations chosen for those apotropaic charms which ward off witchcraft from the house. They are found all over the country; Dorset alone offers a rich

variety. In Hilton, charms were stuck in the windows to keep witches away. At Abbotsbury, holed stones from the beach were tied onto the front door key, which was left in the lock for safety's sake – people worried in those days about repelling witches, but they did not give a thought about letting burglars in. At Hawkchurch, as elsewhere, horseshoes were nailed over cottage doors with the stated purpose of keeping the witches out (*Dorset County Chronicle*; March 1906; Pulman 1875: 535). 'Many who nail up an old shoe in our vessels and houses, though not liking to own their belief, yet consider it would be a pity to receive harm from neglecting so easy a precaution. A piece of bacon stuck with pins used to be suspended in chimneys to intercept witches in their descent, and so avert their visit' (Roberts 1856: 530). This is the Lyme Regis version of a common ritual item, the animal's heart stuck with pins, which was used in ways ranging from aggressive counter-magic to a simple good-luck charm. Bullocks' hearts were used in Dorset, as they were in Devon, while Somerset people seem to have preferred those from pigs (Udal 1922: 213; Kittredge 1920: 99).

Walled-up cats

All these things – the pin-riddled heart, the written charm, the witch bottle and the horseshoe – would be set up where they could avert a danger which came from outside and sought to pass through gaps into the house. People fought back with lucky charms or counterspells, but this was not the only way. *Similia similibus curant*, like heals like, in magic as well as in medicine. So witch animals could be kept away by hanging up the tortured body of another animal of the same kind. Cats were trussed up and left to die in roofs, their mummified bodies acting as guardians against any witches who might try to break in. A

schedule of these relics was drawn up when they first began to be revealed during the renovation of rural houses (Howard 1951) and since then Dorset examples have been published from Corfe Mullen and Marnhull (Pennick 1986: 11; Dewar 1952) and I know of mummified cats from Blacknoll in Winfrith Newburgh and from Maiden Newton. Given the symbolic links between cat and hare, it would be surprising if hares were not occasionally found guarding the boundaries of buildings in the same way, and this turns out to be the case (Howard 1951). They are comparatively rare, but then it is much easier to catch a live cat than a live hare.

The twisted bodies of these sacrifices always arouse mixed feelings when builders come across them. A blow of the hammer breaks open the little hollow where they have been concealed for two or three hundred years; people discuss it as part of their ownership of the past (so curious, these rural superstitions) but they soon go quiet on the subject and have them circumspectly walled up again. Then the cats can continue their work as magical guardians, whereas when they were laid out on the kitchen table, they looked too much like the remains of abused living creatures. Once out of sight, the mummified cat is no longer simply protecting the house, but has come to stand by synecdoche for the house itself – which is obviously impossible when it is in full view as a physical object. Until it is returned, through concealment, to the supernatural realm, the house (or, nowadays, the pub or restaurant) will be troubled by fires, accidents and structural collapse (Pennick 1986: 13, 15). That is how the custom makes sense. But there is something unfair about this to the cat that once lived, rather than the cat-as-symbol. Abused in the first place by being pinned down, walled up and starved to death, it is now reduced to a magical amulet, a sort of leather artefact

stared at by curious visitors. And for once the cat cannot assert its independence by staring back.

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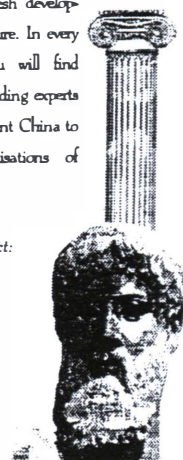
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AT THE EDGE

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Alby Stone: The perilous bridge
Anthony Weir: Time & place - the TV of our minds
Jeremy Harte: Under the greenwood tree
Frank Earp: The wise men of Gotham
Bob Trubshaw: Exploring past and place
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Major articles in *At the Edge* No.2 (June 1996):

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Michael Behrend: Oxhide myths
Bob Trubshaw: Exploring past and place - where next?
 (report on TAG95)

Major articles in *At the Edge* No.3 (September 1996):

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All issues A4 format. The following summarises major articles only and excludes reviews, 'Outlines', letters and brief notes.

No. 17 Royston field trip; Wychbury Hill; Lincs field trip; Earthing the paranormal; Some Staffs ghosts; Papillon Hall ghosts (Leics); Sysonby spirits; Bradgate Park; Gilbert Stone, Yardley; Straight talking; Vernemetum dig report

No. 21 Monuments as ideas; Goddess or queen? - Braunston [Rutland] enigmatic carving; Animism in Hebrew religion part 1: sacred trees; Toot hills; St Ann's well, Nottingham; South Warwickshire field trip; Celtic fallacy forgone

No. 22 The metaphors and rituals of place and time; Oxhide myths; Animism in Hebrew religion part 2: sacred waters; The hounds of Woden; St Kenelm's well; Southam well; Northamptonshire field trip; Notts to Northants alignment; The science of cognitive archaeology; Bronze age rituals in Turkmenistan

No. 24 Archaic heads - guardians of the boundaries; The illusion of landscape; Karlsruhe - the omphalos of Baden; The cosmic mill; Derbys/Staffs field trip; More toot hills; Observations along the Fosse Way; Sheffield field trip; Shrovetide football in Atherstone; Leicestershire stones miscellany; Anglo-Saxon church alignments; *Alien energy* bites back

No. 25 Arbor Low; The question of circularity; Different opinions on Boudicca's last battle; Cambridge field trip; Iceman:shaman?; St Kenelm's Well; Malverns field trip; **plus Index of issues 21 to 25**

LETTERS

From Nigel Pennick

Shaking hands with the Green Man

Just after the New Year I shook hands with a Green Man. I was in Austria in the town of St Johann in Pongau, south of Salzburg at the Perchlenlauf, with is a festival that includes the whole gamut of demonic beings from orc-like 'schiechperchten', witches with broomsticks, guisers as jaw-snapping beasts called 'schnabelpercht' and 'habergeiss'.

Amid the parade are men dressed head to foot in lichens (called the *Verchmannl*, meaning literally 'little lichen



Photo by Nigel Pennick

man'), who climb on the roofs of houses and shower down snow upon the unsuspecting standers-by. There is also a man dressed head to foot in fir cones (the *Zapfenmannl*).

Having seen and met these guisers, it seems likely to me that the so-called 'Green Man' that has been the subject of recent debate might be looked at in the light of traditional guising. Because nineteenth century antiquaries appear to have known little about such things, it is inevitable that they did not see ancient carvings in this light. Also, post-Frazerian ideas about 'spirits' and paganism do not accommodate this line of thought.

Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Wordsworth Editions, 1993, p552) claims that the Green Man and Still inn sign 'refers to the distillation of spirits from green herbs, such as peppermint cordial, and so on. The green man is the herbalist, or the greengrocer of herbs, and the still is the apparatus for distillation.'

[The 1992 edition of Brewer's Book of Myth and Legend (ed. J.C. Cooper, published Cassell) simply states that the Green Man and Still inn sign 'is probably a modification of the arms of the Distiller's Company, the supporters of which were two indians, for which the sign painters usually substituted foresters or green men drinking out of a glass barrel. R.N.T.]

From Jeremy Harte

House as body

Following up on Bob Trubshaw's remarks in *At the Edge* No.5, the best literary instance of the house-as-body which I can remember is the House of Alma in *Faerie Queen* II ix, where Spenser describes an allegorical somatic castle literally from top to bottom. There must have been other Renaissance literature on this topic.

From Louise Bath

Looking for Harry ca Nab

For as long as I can remember, I have been aware of the association of my home town of Halesowen in the West Midlands with a character by the name of Harry ca Nab. Over the years the only information I have been able to unearth about old Harry has him either as an evil apparition or else Satan himself. However, I am sure there must be something more to the legend than this!

The bare bones of the story have Harry as a demonic huntsman. A terrifying horned figure who rides his fiery steed across the hills, Harry and his followers are said to hurtle through the sky in pursuit of their quarry. There is probably also a link between Harry and the story that the Devil was once said to hunt wild boars on the Lickey Hills and to stable his hounds in Halesowen.

I think the story of Harry ca Nab has all the hallmarks of a half-remembered version of the Wild Hunt of Teutonic and Celtic mythology. If so, is it feasible to assume that Harry is a manifestation of Woden/Odin or even Gwyn ap Nudd? Above all, where did his name come from?

Is there anyone with knowledge of the West Midlands who could give some clues? I would be extremely grateful for all and any information concerning this enigmatic figure. {Replies may be sent c/o *At the Edge*.}

Please keep sending letters, comments, queries. Authors of published letters are credited with a complimentary copy of *At the Edge* as a gesture of thanks.



Prepared by Bob Trubshaw
[RT] and Jeremy Harte [JH].

The making of the Mother Goddess

The complex evolution of the idea of a single Great Goddess in the European Neolithic is peeled apart. In the process, four great archaeologists of the 1950s and 60s - Jacquetta Hawkes, Gordon Childe, O.G.S. Crawford and Glyn Daniel - are shown to have been most instrumental in creating the ideas which, while quickly dropped by their academic successors, came to be adopted by those seeking a feminist alternative to monotheistic religions.

Ronald Hutton, 'The Neolithic great goddess: a study in modern tradition', *Antiquity* Vol.71, March 1997 (No.271), pp91-99 [RT]

New Age 'junk' archived for posterity

Chaco Canyon is one of the notable prehistoric sites of New Mexico. It is still used as a ritual site by native Americans, but visited by hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. Increasing numbers of these tourists are 'New Agers' and, despite prohibitory notices, leave a variety of 'votive offerings'. The Park Rangers now collect and archive these deposits 'for the future archaeological and ethnographical record'. The author notes that English heritage do not have a similar collection policy for Stonehenge or other ancient sites in its 'custody'.

Christine Finn, "Leaving more than footprints": modern votive offerings at Chaco Canyon prehistoric site', *Antiquity* Vol.71, March 1997 (No.271), pp169-78 [RT]

Contrary Celts

What do we mean when we refer to ancient Celtic 'ethnicity'? The answers are complex and controversial - and a key player alleges that his views have been misquoted by rivals. His response provides a useful summary of the debate so far.

John Collis, 'Celtic myths', *Antiquity* Vol.71, March 1997 (No.271), pp195-201 [RT]

Ritual landscapes in Cornwall

A member of the Cornwall Archaeological Unit provides an overview of the 'ritual landscapes' of Cornwall in the Bronze Age, including a detailed description of the complex depositions discovered during the excavation of Trelowthas Barrow in 1995.

Jacky Nowakowski, 'Life and death in bronze age Cornwall', *Meyn Mamvro*, No.32 (Winter/Spring 1997), p6-11. [RT]

***Mabinogi* written by a woman?**

Perhaps appropriately for this 'sex and gender' issue of *At the Edge*, a book has recently been published which claims that the oldest and finest example of Welsh literature, the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* was written by a twelfth century Welsh princess, Gwenllïan. Whether Dr Andrew Breeze's arguments are acceptable to fellow academic Celticists remains to be seen.

R. Dobson, 'Is this Welsh princess the first British woman author?', *The Independent*, 11th January 1997. [Cutting kindly sent by Alby Stone.] [RT]

Findern cursus corrected

The Neolithic cursus at Findern, in the Derbyshire stretch of the Trent Valley, was partly excavated in 1969. The

construction of the Derby southern bypass cuts through the cursus and rescue excavation in 1994/5 provided evidence which called into question the 1969 findings. Indeed, it now seems that the cursus ends just short of the bypass! The excavators, Trent and Peak Archaeological Trust, suggest that the 'revised' cursus is known as the Potlock Cursus, after the farm which overlies one of the ditches.

Graeme Gilbert, 'Findern is dead, long live Potlock - the story of a cursus on the Trent gravels', *Past* No.24 (November 1996) p10-12. [RT]

Anglo-Saxon shrines

Place-names suggest that Anglo-Saxon pagan cults worshipped at mounds, trees and perhaps timber posts, but not in buildings. However, the literary sources concentrate on buildings, although these have been archaeologically elusive. What archaeological evidence there is suggests that square 'ritual enclosures' (perhaps based on Romano-Celtic shrines) were used by the early English. Details - with plenty of discussion of specific examples (e.g. Goodmanham church, scene of Bede's famous conversion narrative, may stand on an old barrow) - appear in two excellent papers.

John Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon pagan shrines and their prototypes', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* Vol.8 (1995) p1-28; Audrey Meaney, 'Pagan English sanctuaries, place-names and Hundred meeting-places', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* Vol.8 (1995) p29-42. [Thanks to Gavin Smith, Alby Stone and Jeremy Harte for bringing these to my attention.] [RT]

Focal fires

The image of the household hearth as a sacred centre, which was suggested in *At the Edge* No.5 on the basis of archaeological finds from neolithic Orkney, is a living reality among the Ovahimba of

Namibia. Their fireplaces, as cosmic centres, are both oriented and laid out to correspond with family divisions. The symbolic preference for left over right in fireplace rituals, contrary to the universal norm, is taken to be a ritual reversal of values by David P. Crandall in 'Female Over Male or Left Over Right: Solving a Classificatory Puzzle Among the Ovahimba', *Africa* 66 (1996) pp327-348. [JH]

Red and white

Also in *At the Edge* No.5 was a brief mention of Andy Jones' recognition of the deliberate use of red and white coloured rocks in Neolithic tombs on the island of Arran. He provides further information in 'On the earth-colours of Neolithic death', *British Archaeology*, No.22 (March 1997) p6. [While on this subject, Jeremy Harte notes that red-white-black colour schemes are seemingly universal and would appear to date back to 'primeval culture'; in more recent centuries these colours become inextricably involved in the symbolism of alchemy.] [RT]

Getting it together

The open spaces at the heart of modern Inca towns are important for fiestas and the other ritual assemblies which guarantee the future of the community. Similar features occur in the archaeology of pre-Inca settlements but were different in use, being set aside for the rites of a hierarchy, according to Jerry D. Moore, 'The Archaeology of Plazas and the Proscenics of Ritual', *American Anthropologist* 98 (1996) pp786-802. [JH]

Grave debates

Colonial functionalism met Oriental *feng-shui* head-on when Chinese cemeteries were built in Singapore; the authorities thought they were a nuisance, the Chinese felt they were crucial for prosperity. Geomancers gave repeated presentations of their art to planning committees without breaking the stalemate. Only

when the living Chinese were granted citizenship of the state did they soften up on their demands for the ritual status of the dead: see Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Tan Boon Hui, 'The Politics of Space: Changing Discourses on Chinese Burial Grounds in Post-War Singapore', *Journal of Historical Geography* Vol.21 (1995) pp184-201. [JH]

Holy wells update

David Codling and Douglas Edwards provide a survey of Lincolnshire holy wells in 'Holy Wells Round-Up, *Lincolnshire Past and Present* Vol.23 (1996) p7, Vol.25 (1996) pp11-12. Sites include St Peter's Pool at Bourne, which isn't a well at all but an artificial pond. [JH]

Here's to yew

Further research into the age, or otherwise, or churchyard yews requires detailed local study - and Gwyneth Fooks provides just that in 'Churchyard Yews in the Bourne Area', *Local History Records of the Bourne Society* Vol.35 (1996) pp6-15. Following the footsteps of an 1880 survey of East Surrey yews, she found that half of these had died; meanwhile, many Victorian yews, not even thought worthy of mention in the survey, were found to have attained large dimensions, and some of the older trees were also growing at a similarly brisk rate. [JH]

See also review of *The Origins of the Parish and Hundred of Tandridge* on page 43 of this issue.

Minor standstill at Stonehenge

Observation of the minor standstill moonrise on 2nd October 1996 reveals that the relevant alignments are vague and that no shadows are cast into the henge by the rising moon. D. McNally and C. Ruggles 'The Minor Standstill of the Moon and Stonehenge', *Astronomy and Geophysics*, Vol.38 No.1 (1997) pp30-31 [Information kindly supplied by Alastair McBeath].

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REVIEWS R

Lyn Webster Wilde CELTIC WOMEN IN LEGEND, MYTH AND HISTORY

Blandford 1997

255 x 195 mm, 176 pages, fully illustrated, hardback, £17.99

At last - a book from Blandford's vast catalogue of Celtic titles which acknowledges that there is 'scholarly debate' on who the Celts were - and that myths of powerful goddesses do not mean that the society was matriarchal. *Celtic Women* is certainly better informed than most 'popular' books on such subjects but the Lyn Wilde's background in film-making and writing means that she tends to illustrate her ideas with numerous speculative reconstructions. Even accepting that she includes liberal doses of 'possibly', 'maybe' and 'perhaps', much of what is written draws upon the author's imagination to a far greater extent than is acknowledged.

The intended readership of this book is clearly for people with little knowledge of the so-called 'Celtic' cultures (except perhaps that gained from even more misguided popular works) so these apparent excesses of imagination are perhaps especially dubious. To readers who do have a few 'firm footholds' in the relevant history and myth then such quibbles will perhaps be less important, making *Celtic Women* a stimulating read. Indeed, many of Wilde's suggestions and ideas are

worthy of further thought. For instance, her remarks on St Bride draw upon the ideas of other writers who saw similarities between the priestesses at the pre-Christian shrine to Brigit in Kildare and the 'sacred harlots' of the Middle Eastern cults to Ishtar, Asherah and Aphrodite. Wilde does not simply suggest an analogy, she looks at Highland Scottish folk customs associated with St Brigit where the young men come 'humbly asking permission to honour Bride', and where the conspicuous importance of snakes begins to acquire clearer phallic connotations.

While popular and approachable, *Celtic Women* is hardly a book for children. The author seemingly revels in the liberated sexuality of her subject matter, and provides several lurid 'reconstructions' of their sex life - and detailed speculation on methods of contraception. Whether this is a good thing or not depends on the reader!

The concluding chapters attempt to show how the strengths of real-life Celtic women - such as Flora Macdonald and Maud Gonne - are still entering the popular mythology, and how women are playing a key role in the revival of Celtic music and Gaelic poetry today. However, Wilde does not necessarily accept all of what is offered as being of equal merit. For instance, she specifically suggests that the 'Celtic spirituality' of Caitlin Matthews may be considered by some to be 'backward-looking and sentimental'.

Comparisons to other books are not necessarily legitimate, but given the similarity of the titles, perhaps it is appropriate to mention Peter Berresford Ellis's *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (Constable 1995) as the two books complement each other. Ellis is more solidly factual, although not without new insights, whereas Wilde spends less time presenting facts and leads the reader off into novel

realms. The real difference between the books is that Constable's book design is deadily dull, whereas Blandford bring all the advantages of modern technology into play - although whether the full-colour illustrations by the ubiquitous Courtney Davis are always appropriate to Wilde's ideas is open to debate.

Bob Trubshaw

Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (editors) THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF LANDSCAPE: Perspectives on Place and Space

Clarendon, 1996

268 pages, illustrated, paperback, £14.99

A conference held in London seven years ago has ripened into this collection of ten micro-studies on how different peoples conceptualise their environment. Ranging eclectically from nineteenth-century Paris to Outer Mongolia, all chapters are united in a desire to get beyond the slide-show attitude by which ethnographers have in the past identified other peoples as living in a world of two-dimensional vistas, just like ours. Instead we are given new approaches to what have become the standard global images. While we imagine the Amazonian forest as a sea of green, for the Piro people living there it is a distinct network of household spaces. Our ecological aesthetic of rainforest makes no sense to the Zafirmany of Madagascar, who believe in cutting down trees to improve the view.

The European attitude is only one of many, and it isn't gaining ground, either: there are no vanishing tribes in this book. Two of the cultures studied were industrialised (the Israelis and Indians), while even

colonially marginalised groups like the Yolngu Aborigines clearly have an indigenous future. Change is not the end for traditional societies, nor is Christianity. The Fijians have become enthusiastic Methodists while continuing to live in a world of chiefly hierarchies, foundation myths and water spirits.

Anthropologists have started to look at the landscape as, a little while earlier, they did at the body. Both are not self-evident realities, but a framework of materialised ideas. Can archaeologists get in on this act? Prehistory is cut off from tradition - it has nothing as direct as the New Guinea metaphors of man/tree/society drawn out by Gell, or the subtle Pitjantjara language for landmarks around Uluru (Ayer's Rock) documented by Layton. But conclusions can be drawn from the archaeological record, even though it is only a fraction of the landscape that people see - or rather, sense. As a forest people, the New Guinea Umeda inhabit an auditory landscape where distance and identity are heard, not seen.

Furthermore, a single culture can contain competing landscapes. Humphrey, in what feels the most compelling of the contributions, outlines two separate traditions of rendering space into place in Mongolia. Chiefs think of mountains as their extended lineage identity, dominating a nomadic circuit - while shamans move in visionary routes past the graves of their predecessors at lakes, groves and caves. Shamanic funerary ritual aims at the disappearance of the corpse, which thus edits them (and their landscapes) out of the archaeological record.

Students of the sacred landscape will find their interests a little marginalised in this book. All contributors are broadly social anthropologists and they proceed to show how cultures tailor their landscapes (sacred or secular) to suit the social order. The Zafirmany do not put up sacred stones to

mark power places. They put them up as an embodied rhetoric of permanence grounded in the practical rituals of raising a house and family. But although anthropologists have been perceptive in their theories of how landscape is socially constructed, this view is itself, naturally, constructed - an issue which is only really tackled here by Morphy, analysing Aboriginal theories of people and place. In his academic tradition, 'Dreamtime' geography is linked to kinship ties. For the Yolngu, of course, it's the other way round. Perhaps only a new epistemology, beyond either anthropology or archaeology, can reconcile that one. Meanwhile, for readers who cannot afford the air fare to Madagascar, Mongolia or the Amazon, here is a richly rewarding intellectual journey.

Jeremy Harte

A.J. Hale

THE ORIGINS OF THE PARISH AND HUNDRED OF TANDRIDGE

1996, A5, 60 pages, with maps, stapled pamphlet, price not quoted.

Available from the Vicarage, Tandridge Lane, Tandridge, Oxted, Surrey, RH8 9NN

In the Surrey Weald, beside the busy A25, a brass plaque reminds motorists that they are hurtling past the hill called Undersnow - formerly Hundreds Knoll where Tandridge Hundred used to meet. That is the nucleus of this monograph: a rewarding combination of two traditions - the Victorian zeal of an incumbent writing up the antiquities of his parish, and the modern passion for all things to do with ancient boundaries.

Meticulously referenced, this study covers the topography around the hundredal moot, the early primary units of Surrey and Kent (plus the border

between them, which seems to have swayed to and fro in the period of English settlement) and the colonisation and Christianization of the Weald. Drawing heavily on Blair, Everitt and Witney, it is a contribution to studies of Anglo-Saxon geography and continuity. The nearby Thunderfield Common may have been a pagan sacred centre, though claims for a pre-Christian origin for Tandridge church seem a bit stretched.

Readers of *At The Edge* will be interested in the report on the Tandridge yew, claimed by Meredith as over 2,500 years old. An independent study identifies successive phases of growth in the tree and prunes the estimated date down to 850-1030 years - no older than the church.

Jeremy Harte

BEOWULF

Read in Anglo-Saxon by Trevor Eaton
2 CD set. £25.90 from record shops or (post free) from Pavilion Records Ltd, Sparrows Green, Wadhurst, East Sussex, TN5 6SJ

To some the thought of 145 minutes of fast-paced Old English is horrifying, but to others this two CD set is a long-awaited achievement. Currently, there is a resurgence of interest in the heyday of Anglo-Saxon England, and the Old English language. Such interest in the origins of England as a nation seems ironic, but nevertheless appropriate, at a time when major political parties are consigning the country into a German-dominated 'United States of Europe' - but I digress.

Without doubt *Beowulf* is the finest of the epic poems written in Old English and, regrettably, it is many years since recordings in the original language have been readily available. Therefore, Trevor Eaton's latest endeavour is to be warmly welcomed - doubly so, as he provides his listeners

with the complete text. Eaton is a former university lecturer in Anglo-Saxon and previously best known for his performances of Chaucer in the original Middle English. As might be expected, his pronunciation of Old English is reliable.

Where Eaton differs from usual readings of Old English poetry is that, although he acknowledges that the text is written in the distinctive Old English poetic style, he reads the sentences as if they were prose. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, as the main 'structuring device' of Old English poetry is the frequent alliteration between words, and this 'word play' comes across well. Even more unexpected is the fast tempo which Eaton maintains throughout the reading - no ponderous Radio 4-style mannerisms here! Nevertheless, there is over 70 minutes of recording on each CD. To avoid 'getting lost', the CDs have extensive 'track numbers' and the leaflet uses these to provide a line-by-line guide to readily available printed editions of *Beowulf*.

Not a recording for the 'casual listener' but recommended to all with an active interest in Old English and the Anglo-Saxon era.

Bob Trubshaw

Eric Ratcliffe

STRANGE FURLONGS

Astrapost 1996

A5, 9 pages, card covers, stapled £1.50

Available from Astrapost, 7 The Towers, Stevenage, Hertfordshire, SG1 1HE

Poetry is not usually a feature of *At the Edge* reviews, but the style and, to a lesser extent, the subject matter of Eric Ratcliffe's long poem *Strange Furlongs* seems to be a justified exception. The author encourages his readers to '... forget the wordly standards and beliefs on the furlongs of Earth as we find other and stranger

furlongs to traverse.' The strange furlongs he traverses with us comprise a flickering of eclectic images - this is narrative poetry for a post-modern, post-narrative era. The poem opens thus:

Cotswold springs.

The Man has greened.
His hidden music bells
the downs;
fine note waves,
shell sounds, as if
pressed human ear
hears continuous
phantom.

One of the more lucid sections reads:

Deep near graveyards of the
parishes:
Icenian torques in buried
glory,
Corintian coins in gathered
hoards.
Tribal boundaries tell no
stories
of host life in the ancient
vales,
Lindsey, Belvoir, Catmose
sleep
under new gods and
rebirthed borders.
Forest guardians are felled,
emblems of fertility revealed
for housing under glass; new
eyes
will peer at goddesses more
real
than specimens of history,
unceremonially unearthed.
Scattered furlongs cherished,
lost.

Also available from Astrapost is Eric Ratcliffe's *The Millennium of the Magician*, A5, 17 pages, card covers, stapled, £3.00. This is another long poem whose theme is 'the Disfigurement of mankind through concentration on material ends, at the expense of spiritual advancement as intended by the Creator. His magician examines the problems after preparation of a protected site and meditation in a cave at Vallons-Pont-D'Arc.'

Bob Trubshaw

EARTHED No.1

A4, 24 pages

£1.75 incl. p&p from:

Ubik, 5A The Crescent, Hyde Park Corner, Leeds, LS6 2NW
Cheques to 'Ubik'.

In the opening 'blurb', the coeditors ask 'Why bother to do yet another low-rent Fortean 'zine?' and answer themselves thus:

'We believe that weird shit happens, but that it happens a lot less often, and less dramatically, than many people would like you to believe. We feel that healthy doses of both cynicism and scepticism are essential when considering reports of anomalous events ...'

Cynicism and scepticism certainly abound in the pages of *Earthed*; indeed, the writing style is unerringly irreverent. This will come as no surprise to those who have already encountered the previous writings and rants of arch-irreverend Paul Bennett - yes, folks, he's back, ably assisted by Jake Kirkwood. The Centre of the Universe for this dubious duo is West Yorkshire, which means a few thwacks at those from Down South. Also thwacked are 'sham' shamans; 'the great mass of pagans [whose] visions of the otherworlds are so hobbit-bobbity that they're impossible for grown up people to relate to'; and ufologists with a predilection for the 'extra-terrestrial hypothesis'. 'Positive vibes' are empowered for Devereux's 'earth lights hypothesis' and for infrasound and electromagnetic fields as a cause for altered states of consciousness. The major article is by chaos magician Phil Hine on 'The physics of evocation' which brings together some hitherto-unconnected associations between 'earth mysteries' and magic(k).

When so many of the long-established pagan and 'earth mysteries' 'zines have become a little too predictable,

the arrival of *Earthed* provides cognitive dissonance for even the most battle-hardened veterans. If I have a gripe, it is that too many of the 'sources' seem a tad dated - but *At the Edge* will be exchanging with *Earthed*, so now they'll be brought up-to-date with 'new interpretations' just like you all.

Bob Trubshaw

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